



KINKS OF A  
*Billionaire*



EVA WINNERS

**Kinks of a Billionaire**  
**Billionaire King Series**

**Eva Winners**

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# **KINKS OF A BILLIONAIRE PLAYLIST**

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# **Billionaire King Series**

The series covers each Ashford brother separately. While each book in the series can be read as a standalone, events and references to the other books are present in each one of these. So, for best enjoyment, consider giving each Ashford brother a chance. 😊

Enjoy!  
Eva Winners

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## Note

Timeline for Royce's book isn't in line with Kingston's book. In fact, it occurs months before, more in line with and right after Winston's book.

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*To all those who loved their morally gray heroes with a big heart.*

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## **Author's Note**

Kinks of a Billionaire is a complete standalone. No other books need to be read prior to this; however, please note that events in this story happen before Reign of a Billionaire. This book also references events that happened in Raphael's book from the series Belles & Mobsters.

Resemblance to actual persons and things living or dead, locations, or events is entirely coincidental.

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# Blurb

Royce Ashford.

The hottest man I'd ever met.

The first man I'd fallen for.

I'd had a crush on my best friend's older brother for as long as I could remember. His charm and sex appeal could seduce a saint, never mind a sex-crazed woman.

With his cocky grin, broad shoulders, and filthy mouth, he was a heartbreaker in a leather jacket. And the leading man in every single one of my naughty fantasies.

The first time I kissed him, we ended up locked in the friend zone. Apparently my make-out skills left much to be desired. In my defense, I was too young and inexperienced back then.

I'd grown up and totally gotten over him.

Until my engagement fell apart and Royce swooped in like my very own Prince Charming, saving me again.

One tiny problem.

I was falling for him all over again. My lustful imagination, raging hormones, and accidental glimpses of Royce's nakedness weren't helping. Neither were the rumors of Royce's kinky tendencies.

But I refused to be a footnote in Royce's life. If we were doing this, we'd do it all.

We'd go all the way.

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# Prologue

Willow, 18 Years Old



I kneed my boyfriend in the balls—hard—and grabbed my purse. “You fucking...” he wheezed, but I didn’t wait to hear the remainder of his words. I bolted out of his room as he doubled over in pain, my pulse roaring in my ears while my brain chanted *stupid, stupid, stupid*. I shouldn’t have come, but I never could have fathomed Hudson would get so handsy. So violent.

I ran from the manor, overflowing with drunks and debauchery, holding my ripped shirt together. It wasn’t until my feet hit the wet grass that I realized I’d forgotten my shoes. I pulled my phone from my purse, tripping over the flat ground in the process.

Coming to a stop at the lookout, I gripped my phone tighter. The pounding rain soaked me to the bone as I looked up at the lightning scattering across the gray sky.

The storm cast an ominous glow over the Bethesda skyline, and if I squinted, I could probably pinpoint where the apartment I shared with my best friends sat in the distance.

There were probably worse things than being stranded an hour from home in the middle of a storm while wearing a torn-up shirt and having to call your parents for a ride. But right now, I couldn’t think of a single one.

Standing on the grassy hillside, I could hear laughter and music coming from inside the home, the party still in full swing. After my boyfriend—ex-boyfriend—attempted to manhandle his way into my panties, I kneed him so hard his howl could have been heard all the way in Virginia.

I couldn't stop shivering, my teeth chattering both from the cold and my deep-seated anxiety. Tears stung my eyes as I hovered my finger over my mother's number. She would be so disappointed, but I was out of options. I couldn't call Sailor because her sister, Anya, was due to have a baby any day now. She might be my best friend, but I wouldn't let her risk missing the birth of her niece or nephew. Aurora had an internship she'd just started, so she would be tied up until at least ten o'clock, which would mean standing outside this godforsaken estate for another three hours. No way.

I mentally scrolled through my options, but I knew there were none. I'd have to bite the bullet and call my mother if I didn't want to stay by myself, alone, in the middle of nowhere after dark.

Just as I was about to press the call button, a name flashed across the screen, and my heart stopped. I scrambled to answer before my brain could process my motions.

"Royce," I murmured into the phone, my voice quivering. I'd never been happier to hear from my best friend's brother who I'd had a crush on since my first year of high school. There were so many days and sleepovers we'd had at Aurora's place, her gorgeous brothers overseeing it. But none of them were as gorgeous as Royce with his bad-boy vibes.

"What's wrong?"

My defenses instantly flared. "What makes you think something's wrong?"

"Your quivering voice is a pretty good indication." It didn't surprise me he'd caught on to my inner turmoil. Royce had a sixth sense for trouble, and he'd known me and my friends to get into trouble once or twice. "Besides, I can tell when you're lying and upset."

I sighed in resignation, pinching my brow.

"I... I went to this party. With a b-boy." My stuttering was embarrassing, but the fact that I put myself in such a stupid position was even more so. "H-he... t-tried... and I didn't w-want—"

Thunder boomed, shaking the ground, and I whimpered, searching for any possible shelter other than the damned house I just came out of. The wind swept through, bending the branches of nearby trees.

"Where are you?" I winced at the anger in his tone, but I told him anyway. I had nothing to lose at this point. The raindrops splattered, making my words tremble. "Drop me a pin with your location. I'll come and get you."

My shaky fingers made it a nightmare to pull up the app, but I managed to eventually. I dropped the pin and heard a beep on his end. Screeching tires followed right after, telling me he was more than likely breaking one—or a few—traffic laws.

“Y-you got it?”

“I did. Stay on the phone with me. I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“Th-thank you,” I murmured, my teeth clacking. Aurora’s brothers were the most reliable; they’d always had the ability to put us girls at ease growing up. Yes, they were overprotective and a tad scary at times, but I wasn’t going to complain about that in my current desperate state. “How come you called?”

A rustling noise came from his end just as the rain began to ease, turning into a soft drizzle.

“Aurora and Byron are on the way to the hospital. Anya’s having her baby.”

My eyes widened in horror. “Now?” I shrieked.

Byron was Aurora’s brother, but he took care of all of us. When Sailor’s sister, Anya, got pregnant, he didn’t judge. He didn’t coerce her to tell him who the father was. He just ensured the best OB/GYN in the D.C. region had tended to her. The Ashford name had opened a lot of doors for him, and he never hesitated to use that benefit to help others too.

“Yes.”

“Where? Did someone call her sister?”

“Sailor is at George Washington University Hospital with Anya.”

Regret washed over me. Yet another reason why I shouldn’t have been at this stupid party.

“I promised I’d be with her,” I rasped.

“You will. She’ll likely be in labor for a while. You know Byron—he probably wants to ensure Anya has everything she needs while in the hospital.” Silence followed as shudders rolled down my spine. I tried to center myself, peering around and working on spotting something I could see, hear, or smell. I noted the dusk grays were quickly turning into twilight darks. The damp leaves under my feet felt cold and rough. “I promise you, Willow,” Royce said, “you won’t miss it.”

I let out a long breath. Royce had never let me down before. One thing that all of Aurora’s brothers had in common was that they never broke their

promises. Suddenly, fatigue came over me and I walked back over to the curb and sat, hugging my small purse to my chest.

“Thanks for coming for me,” I breathed.

“So, who’s this boy?”

“Hudson.” I’d hate that name forever. “He’s an idiot.”

A bright beam of headlights appeared in the distance and I rushed to my feet, my heart tripping in hope. A sleek black Bugatti came to a screeching stop in front of me, the fumes from his engine dissipating as the wind carried them over the hill.

Royce jumped out of the still-running car, wearing his black leather jacket. I slumped with relief. Royce was a genetically engineered tank stuffed inside a designer suit—or a leather jacket, it depended on the situation. Today he’d opted for the latter—the choice I secretly loved more than his designer suits.

My relief was short-lived. He took one look at me and narrowed his eyes, and I could see enough from the glow of his headlights to know they darkened in warning.

He was enraged, and the force of his fury was so palpable I could taste it in the air.

“I’m okay,” I said through the gravel in my throat, wrapping my arms around my torso.

With a clenched jaw, he came around the car and slid his jacket off.

“Here, put this on.” When I didn’t move, he hooked the heavy leather onto my shoulders and wrapped it tight. He opened the passenger door. “Stay in the car, I’ll be right back.”

He gently nudged me into the seat, then slammed the door.

A frustrated noise left me and I reached for the door handle, opening it. “Royce, what are you doing?”

He didn’t even slow his stride. “*Hudson!*” he roared as he approached the manor, his voice echoing with the thunder rumbling through the sky. “Get your ass out here or I’m going to blow this fucking house to ashes.”

My stomach dropped and I sprung out of the car.

“Royce,” I called out, running after him.

The front door opened and Hudson appeared with a few of his friends at his side. He always felt braver with his buff sidekicks. I barely had time to blink before Royce punched Hudson, sending him falling onto the marble floor of his foyer.



“Holy shit,” I whispered, clutching his jacket. I always knew Royce was protective, but it had always been directed toward his sister—never at me. And right now, he was acting like he was about to go on a murderous rampage.

Hudson’s largest friend came after Royce, but before he could land a hit, Royce shoved him to the floor like he weighed nothing. Eyes on the whimpering guy, Royce dropped down to straddle him, unleashing punch after punch. More of the party trickled out from various rooms and corridors to witness the savagery.

Just as a few more guys were about to attack Royce, I screamed, “Behind you!” and Royce pulled out a gun and pointed it at them. “Oh my G-God.”

Using both my hands to grab Royce by his bicep, I attempted to pull him up off the nearly unconscious guy. “He’s not worth it. Let’s just go.”

Instead, he landed another blow to the man while keeping his gun pointed at Hudson and his buddy.

“We’re not done. These fuckers are still breathing.” Royce sounded unrepentant. I continued yanking his arm until he finally let me drag him away, his breathing hard and his eyes burning. “You see this woman?” he roared to the entire audience. “She’s under my protection. Nobody hurts her. You lay a finger on her without her consent and you’re dead. I will end you. Do you understand?”

And for the remainder of my college years, not a single boy on campus dared to touch me.

## Royce

After our detour to the hospital, I brought Willow back to my penthouse.

Anya was in a panic, Sailor was distraught, and I convinced Willow it was best to give them some space because we weren’t helping either one of them by hovering around. Byron handled the hospital like a champ and eventually managed to convince Aurora to do the same. We’d all agreed to meet back at the hospital once the baby was born.

Willow and I walked through the door of my penthouse when the clock struck midnight, the adrenaline from the night making it impossible to settle down, let alone sleep. Heat poured through my blood having Willow in my

penthouse. We'd crossed paths many times over the years, but it was never in my private home. An unfamiliar soft flame flickered in my chest, but I smothered it down. This was my baby sister's best friend. Off-limits. She belonged firmly in the friend zone because I liked her—a lot—and she'd be around for many years to come.

So, after a shower, we popped in a movie and she sipped on beer, trying to relax. I knew her mind was on Anya, but I tried my best to distract her. In a friendly kind of way.

By the time three o'clock rolled around, she'd had one too many beers.

Willow looked up at me with a lopsided grin. "I should probably go. Aurora's probably back by now."

"She's with Byron. Anya and Sailor are still at the hospital. Stay the night," I suggested. She wasn't yet twenty-one, so I couldn't risk her getting caught publicly intoxicated—especially underage. Besides, it was my fault. I put on the first movie *and* the second one, and with two bowls of popcorn as our only sustenance, I allowed her buzz to grow into a full-on hammered state. "Besides, you'll need someone to drive you once visiting hours come around."

"Thank you again for tonight." Willow hiccupped. "I hadn't thought the night would end so well. Anya's about to have a baby. I'm single."

She scooted closer to me, and the delicate scent of citrus mixed with a vague earthy undertone seeped into my lungs. For some reason, my mind drifted to the serene image of a rolling green hill, a single willow tree dancing in the breeze. I internally shook my head. She was too young, barely of age. Totally not my type.

Yet, my dick jumped in excitement at the mere thought of driving inside her.

*Shit, bad idea. A fucking bad idea, Royce.*

The second movie finished and we lingered on the couch, watching as the credits rolled up the screen. From my periphery, I could sense Willow fidgeting, looking like she was about to burst.

"You okay?" I finally asked her, turning my body slightly to face her. Even in the dim light, I could see her cheeks turning redder than I'd ever seen them. "Willow, you're acting weird."

She hiccupped again. "I'm drunk."

"I know. But that's no reason—"

Before I could finish the sentence, she grabbed the cotton of my shirt, leaned in, and pressed her lips on mine. They were warm and soft, the alcohol on her breath mixing with my own. She moved her mouth against my closed one, darting her tongue out to lick my bottom lip. It was unpracticed and awkward at best, but it sent fire into my veins.

I sat up and tightened my grip on her as I thrust my tongue inside, tasting the sweet sin that was so uniquely her. She kissed me back, writhing against me, her perky tits pressing against my chest.

Our breathing turned frenzied, and her hand came to rest on my groin. I jerked, and the lustful fog cleared. I pulled her back by a fistful of her dark hair, her sparkling eyes a myriad of blue, gray, and green.

“Why did you stop?” she blurted out, her gaze fixed on mine.

“You’re drunk.” She must have blinked fifty times, trying to process the meaning behind my words.

“Aren’t you attracted to me?” She leaned closer, her lips skimming my neck. Fuck, the girl was easily addictive. But too damn young for me. “I know you only do no-strings-attached sex. I’m okay with it.”

This time she stunned my ass into silence. Of course I was attracted to her, but no-strings sex with her would be a slippery slope.

“We spend too much time together to just have casual sex,” I reasoned. Willow, Sailor, and my sister were inseparable. They lived together. They partied together. Hell, they didn’t even keep secrets amongst each other. *Fuck*. “We’re friends.”

I could see Willow’s expression fall. I almost wished I was hammered too. It would make the awkwardness of this conversation easier to bear.

“We can sleep together and stay friends.” Her voice was barely a whisper, her cheeks turning crimson. Her eyes were glazed and wanton. It’d be so damn easy to give in, consequences be damned.

“You’re too good for this,” I grunted. “Too good for me.”

She shook her head. “I’m not asking you to marry me. Or write sonnets. It’s just sex, Royce.”

The earth started to spin faster, temptation staring back at me, wide-eyed with swollen lips. I was pretty good at handling alcohol, but this was new. I’d never reacted like this to anyone suggesting a casual fuck.

“I don’t want things to be weird between us when it doesn’t work out. Like I said, you’re too good for a one-night stand.”

Her shoulders slumped further.

“You’re right. I shouldn’t have said anything.” She exhaled, then licked her lips. “I just wanted... *hoped* you’d take my virginity. Since you’re so experienced.”

I sat up.

“Virginity?” I repeated shocked. “And who the hell told you I’m experienced?”

She stood abruptly, waving her hands. “Come on, Royce. Everyone knows you’re a playboy. Everywhere you go, girls fall all over themselves for you. So why won’t you sleep with me?”

Silence stretched, unnerving and jarring. “You want me to pop your cherry, and you think it would mean nothing to me?”

I rose and started to pace, trying to convince myself to keep my distance from her despite how aroused I was. She deserved better than me and my questionable sexual proclivities.

“Willow, you deserve better.” My voice deepened, and I hoped she’d hear the sincerity in it. Her next words told me she didn’t. “Please don’t tempt me further.”

“You’re right. This was stupid.” She smiled, and this reaction had me reeling even more. “I’m obviously drunk. Friends?”

“Always.”

“Let’s never bring this up again. Okay?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

We didn’t speak of it again.

The events of the next morning would forever be remembered for a different reason. Willow’s life—all our lives—was about to be flipped upside down by Anya’s death and a newborn baby boy.

# Chapter 1

## Royce



*Present Day*

***Billionaire Royce Ashford is single and under fire again. This playboy changes women more frequently than most people change their underwear.***

I rolled my eyes. They made it sound as if I changed girlfriends weekly, or even daily. I continued reading on.

***Does he have STDs?***

Oh, for fuck's sake.

***Is something wrong with the playboy, or is he looking for love in all the wrong places? Is he in a secret relationship?***

I barely held back a laugh as I read the latest headlines while waiting for Willow. I was at The Godfather, the most elitist restaurant in D.C. located smack-dab in the heart of the city. For the past ten years, we'd made a point to catch up regularly, whether here or in California, and often other parts of the world.

And then of course there was the minor stalking, but that only started recently. And it was just a tiny bit. Only enough to ensure she was safe with the guys she chose to date, and since she refused a bodyguard, I had to resort to drastic measures.

My eyes roamed over the remainder of the article, which was basically just more of the same questions about the “constant women” in my life. Basically my sister and Willow, and occasionally Sailor.

I gave my head a subtle shake.

I didn’t understand people’s obsession with the Ashford family. People always acted like we were celebrities, but the truth was there was nothing glamorous or cool about us. Death and destruction followed us, and karma or the universe or whatever higher deity was pulling the strings up there made each member of this family pay for the sins of our father. Although things seemed to be looking up these days—at least for my brothers.

“Would you like anything to drink, Mr. Ashford?” The waitress’s voice interrupted my thoughts and I lifted my eyes off the paper to find a redhead standing in front of me.

“Scotch on the rocks, please,” I said. “And for my friend...” She glanced around, frowning, and I continued, “She’s coming. Vodka and watermelon punch. It’s her favorite.”

“Absolutely.” The waitress suddenly pulled out a chair and took a seat next to me, blushing excessively. “You’re the hottest man I’ve ever seen.” I stretched my paper out in front of my face, ignoring her. “Your brothers are hot too,” she added, trying to poke her head around the sports section.

“I’m ready for that drink,” I told her, my attention still on the paper. She disappeared with a frustrated breath and the scraping of the chair against the floor. I knew that drink wouldn’t be coming anytime soon.

The chime of the door had me turning my head, and my jaw nearly dropped at the sight of Willow. She was a vision in snug jeans and a skintight top with a plunging neckline. Her eyes darted around until they landed on me. A wide smile spread over her face and she waved as she headed my way, oblivious to the way every man was stealing glances at her.

As she closed the distance between us, I shot to my feet and slid my hand around her waist.

“Did you dress like this for me?”

She looked into my eyes, her cheeks flushing red. “Who else?”

I held back a laugh. We both knew she didn't. Willow had come straight from the set of her latest movie, and she always dressed to the nines when working.

"How was work today?" I gently grabbed her wrist and guided her into the chair across from me, then retook my seat. She waved her hand as if she were chasing the topic away and instead snatched the paper that lay in front of me.

"Stop reading that garbage, Royce," she scolded, folding it and dropping it onto the adjacent table. Willow was my sounding board, and things between us had blossomed into a true friendship. Sometimes I wondered what would have happened if I hadn't stopped our kiss that night ten years ago, but then I reminded myself that I'd done the right thing. She was too young; I was too wild. She didn't need to get pulled into my fucked-up shit.

"It's not all bad."

She scoffed. "Such as?"

"For starters, what movies you're producing and what you've been up to."

She scoffed. "More than likely, they don't know. I don't read that crap, and neither should you."

"You know, you grew up," I remarked. "People's opinions used to worry you."

She shrugged. "I did grow up," she said, rolling her eyes. "You should too. Besides, you know they're full of shit."

"For the record, I haven't had sex with anyone in six months."

"Riiiiight," she said, looking unconvinced.

"And I get tested frequently, thank you very much. *And* I always use protection."

"I didn't really need to know that."

"In fact, I got my test results yesterday, and I'm clean as a whistle. I'm telling you the truth, Willow."

She laughed softly. "Royce, you're the most dependable man I know. You might be reckless, but you do it responsibly." She smirked. "Ignore those idiots. They're just jealous."

The door to the restaurant opened again, and I let out a frustrated breath. "This waitress will probably take forever to bring us drinks. I'm shuddering to think how long dinner will take."

Willow's eyebrow arched. "Is she an ex-girlfriend?"

"Redheads are not my type." I gave her a pointed look. "Pretty brunettes are more my thing."

She scoffed. "Then why are you always papped with blondes?"

"Because brunette status is reserved only for my best friend," I said.

She tapped her chin, batting her eyes at me innocently, but a mischievous smile played around her lips. "Why does it feel like this is leading to you asking for a favor?"

"You know me well."

Her cheeks reddened. "So what is it, Mr. Ashford?"

I smiled at her. "An ex from years ago appeared," I started. "She's mistaken my single status for an invitation."

Willow let out that melodious laugh I loved so much. "Okay, use me as your defense."

I grinned. "I love you."

"Yeah, yeah." A small smile played around her lips as she tapped her fingers nervously against the table. Almost as if she wanted to say something but was holding back.

"Is something wrong?"

Her eyes met mine and she sighed.

"No, but I do have a question." I raised my eyebrow, my interest captured as I waited for her to continue. "I'd ask a brother if I had one." Her button nose wrinkled. "Or maybe not. Yeah, probably not. But luckily, you're not my brother..."

"Just spit it out, Willow." She wasn't usually the nervous or shy type.

"There's a myth that if a woman eats pineapple, her 'down there' will taste better when a guy uses his mouth on her. Is that true?" Her cheeks had turned bloodred, but to her credit, she didn't glance away. I smiled as she twisted her fingers nervously atop the table. "Do you have any experience in that area?"

I stood to my feet and extended my hand. "Should we go test it out?"

She crossed her arms and my gaze fell to her breasts. Fuck, she had nice boobs. But then I remembered who I was ogling and found her looking at me like I'd lost my mind.

"It's not funny, Royce. I seriously want to know."

"How about we talk about it over dinner," I said, flicking a glance toward the bar and the kitchen. "At my place, because I'm starving and the



damn service around here is hopeless.”

“The key word being talk, right?”

I smiled. “Of course. After all, what are best friends for?”

She sighed and took my hand. “This better be good.”

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## Chapter 2

### Willow



Present Day

**R**ing! Ring! Ring!

The doorbell sounded at the same time as the oven timer went off, and we shared a glance.

“Expecting a girlfriend?” I asked, both of us seated at the breakfast island of his penthouse’s fancy kitchen. “I refuse to have a conversation about pineapples and... ummm... *that* in front of anyone else.”

He chuckled.

“Let’s ignore the door,” he said, brushing a strand of my hair away from my face. “We’re having an important conversation about a man going down on you.”

I swatted his hand away. “God, can’t you give me a break and just tell me if pineapples are good or not?”

“Has this man gone down on you before?”

“That’s none of your business.” My cheeks reddened.

“So that’s a no.” He handed me a shot glass.

I let out an exasperated breath. “There’s no man. This is purely hypothetical. I want to know for the future.”

“Are you telling me none of your boyfriends have gone down on you?”

I downed the alcohol. “Again, I’m not discussing it with you. I just want to know, from a man’s perspective, if the pineapple myth is true.”

His lips curved into a smirk.

“Yes,” he answered, finally taking pity on me.

Just as I was about to ask another question, the doorbell rang again, and we both groaned. I was looking forward to a quiet night.

“I’ll get rid of whoever it is, and you get the tray out of the oven before our food burns.”

I padded barefoot on the cool marble into Royce’s elegant kitchen and pulled a tray from the oven. The scent of lasagna drifted through the air and my stomach promptly growled.

The muffled voice traveled over the penthouse. I stilled, eavesdropping, but it was too hard to distinguish the words.

Worried that Royce needed a rescue from a female stalker, I placed the tray on top of the stove, then followed the hushed voices toward the entryway. I peeped around the corner and found Royce standing in the foyer with a guy who had the most perfect set of pearly whites.

My eyes dropped to Royce’s ass, forgetting for a moment that we were just friends. Even dressed down in a white T-shirt and jeans, he looked like he’d stepped out of a magazine. The ink covering his arms gave him a touch of bad-boy energy, while his manners remained impeccable. It was what I loved the most about him.

As if he sensed my eyes on him, Royce turned his head and his dark gaze met mine. I stepped around the corner and flicked a glance at his visitor, finding him watching me with a smile.

“Well, hello,” he greeted me, stepping farther into Royce’s penthouse and extending his hand. “I’m Stuart, Royce’s buddy from back in our service days.”

My brows shot up. Royce rarely talked about his days in the Special Forces. I accepted his warm handshake and smiled.

“Willow.” I tilted my head toward Royce. “His buddy from my high school days.”

Technically, we became best friends my first year of college, but I didn’t feel like explaining the specifics.

“Willow and I are about to have dinner. Now is not a good time, Stuart,” Royce said, a hint of annoyance in his voice.

“Shame.” Stuart smiled and squeezed my hand when I tried to tug it back. “Because I brought dessert.”

He lifted his other hand, and sure as shit, he held a pastry box with a clear plastic lid. And inside... sat the fanciest-looking pineapple upside-

down cake I'd ever seen. My mouth dropped open and my eyes flitted to Royce, who was studying the pineapple rounds scattered along the iced sponge cake, his grin reaching up his amused face. One heartbeat, two, and we burst into laughter.

We took it as a sign and invited Stuart in to stay for dinner.

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## Chapter 3

### Royce



*A Few Months Later*

Stuart: Hey, buddy. Where are you?

I ignored the message. Before I even got to put my phone away, it buzzed again.

Stuart: I'll never be able to repay you for introducing me to Willow.

I gritted my teeth.

Stuart: I have some news for you.

I clenched my jaw and glared at the message from my best friend's boyfriend. Stuart Harris, heir to the distinguished Harris family empire and an old friend from my combat days, was an alright guy until he started dating Willow.

Hypocritical? Fuck yes. Did I care? Fuck no. Why? Because I knew he wasn't good enough for Willow.

I didn't know it then, but when I picked her up from that frat party ten years ago to this very day, it marked the beginning of our close friendship. I refused to let her *temporary* boyfriend—and he would be temporary—ruin my day. In regards to dating, Willow and I were very much the same. The lifespan of our relationships matched that of mosquitos—a week or two,

tops. In fact, we often joked that *our* relationship was the longest commitment either of us had ever had with the opposite sex.

“Are you fucking listening to me at all?” Byron, my newlywed brother, shouted, pulling me out of my thoughts. We were seated in his home office in D.C. while he talked about his future plans in that new, blissfully content tone of his. And that was pretty much when I stopped listening to him.

“I’m trying to tune you out,” I said flatly. “But your voice resembles that of a high-pitched opera singer, so it’s fucking hard. Take pity on me and shut up.”

The look he gave me told me he wasn’t amused by my comeback.

“I have no fucking idea how your investments make you so much money,” he muttered. “A two-year-old’s attention span is better than yours.”

That was where he was wrong, because a two-year-old wouldn’t be waiting with bated breath for that breakup text notification from his best friend. It had been weeks—*months*—overdue, and with each passing day, the same uncomfortable feelings coiled in the pit of my stomach.

I delayed my trip to the Himalayas, my off-grid outings to Africa, and even refused a few find-and-rescue assignments with Byron’s buddy River, all because I’d been waiting for that call or text from my Willow.

River served in Afghanistan with my brother, although I had crossed paths with him a few times during my military days as well. He, along with his buddies, owned a security company in Portugal. It wasn’t advertised, but sometimes they did bidding for the mafia, and I’d never been so tempted to use him in the same capacity.

However, I was quite capable of handling my own dirty laundry. Not that it would come to that though, because Stuart would not last. *He better not.*

Stuart had better become history, and soon, otherwise I’d lose my goddamn mind. Willow was mine, and that fucker couldn’t have her.

*Mine?*

A storm raged in my chest so violently and suddenly, it would’ve brought me to my knees had I been standing.

“What?” Byron questioned before a frown touched his face, studying me with a puzzled expression. I quickly masked my emotions, not ready to go there with my big brother.

“I just realized something.”

“What?”

*That Willow is mine.* “That you’re annoying.”

My pulse drummed in my ears as warmth spread through my veins and toward my heart, intent on conquering it. I rubbed at my sternum, hoping to massage this unfamiliar feeling away. What was happening to me?

“You’re an ass, Royce.”

I ignored him and said, “I have to go to Portugal,” already typing a message on my phone.

“What? Now?” Byron looked shocked. “The meeting with our shareholders is about to start.”

I stood and adjusted the sleeve of my suit. I fucking hated wearing these, preferring leather and jeans to this stiff attire. Byron, on the other hand, was probably born in a suit.

“Yeah, you got this. I have to handle some other business.”

I held my brother’s stare, challenging him to say something. He didn’t disappoint.

“Can’t that *other business* wait?” he gritted.

“No,” I said coldly. “This is a matter of life or death.”

My brother rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I’m sure it is.”

Maybe not in his book, but in mine, it was. Willow was visiting her parents in Portugal, and I couldn’t wait another day before seeing her again.

Because if I did, *I* might fucking die.



“Royce,” Willow cried, spreading her arms wide the instant she saw me, uncaring that her parents were in the other room. “I couldn’t believe my ears when I got your message. What made you decide to visit me on a whim?” My mood always lifted under her beaming light, and I let her wintergreen scent wrap around me as she hugged me tightly, her short frame barely reaching my chest. I soaked in her glow, relaxing instantly. “You seem to be slipping too. Nine hours to get here,” she reprimanded with a teasing grin.

I slipped an arm over her shoulder and kissed the top of her head. She let out a little hum, and we headed into the small bungalow Willow’s parents owned on the outskirts of Lisbon, my troubles already fading away.

It had been ten years since we'd made our friendship pact, and it had always felt like the right choice. She was the only woman who accepted me as I was, not trying to change me or use me. I wasn't perfect, and neither was she. But when we were together, we were absolute fucking perfection.

"Was the flight delayed?" she murmured again as she pulled away to look up at me, her small hands on my chest doing all sorts of things to my heartbeat.

Fuck!

What was I going to do? I needed to tell her Stuart was all wrong for her. How could I have been so blind all these years? I realized that the timing to confess my feelings wasn't exactly right, and it might come off as wanting something you could no longer have.

"My damn pilot is adamant about aviation rules and regulations. Snore. I'll have to fire him," I said just as her parents appeared from another room, dressed to go out. "Mr. and Mrs. Auclair. Looking fancy tonight. All that for me?" I teased.

"Mr. Auclair is taking me on a date," said Mrs. Auclair, clucking her tongue and winking at me. "You two enjoy yourselves. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Willow laughed, leaning forward to press a warm kiss to her mother's cheek.

"*Mãe*, I swear your subtlety improves with age."

"*Sim*," she agreed gravely, eyes sparkling as she looked between the two of us. I'd always found it amusing when Mrs. Auclair alluded to the nature of our friendship, but it meant so much more today. Because now, I feared I was too late. "I can't help it."

Before she could say anything else, Mr. Auclair tugged her arm gently, urging her past us and out the door. "Royce, you know where everything is. You two have a great night."

"You as well, sir."

The door shut behind them and I laughed, letting Willow pull me farther into the small kitchen.

"Help me finish cutting up the veggies for our salad," she demanded, then handed me a knife. "Everything else is ready for us."

"First let me give you your gift."

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a small package. Her eyes lit up like a Christmas tree, and I couldn't help but chuckle as she reached for it



greedily. "What is it?"

"Open it."

She ripped the package open, and the moment she spotted it, she gasped. "*Oh my God.*" Her eyes found me, looking at me like *I* was her God. "What? How?" she squealed.

"I've got my ways," I drawled.

"But it's been discontinued." She twisted the bottle between her fingers as if she held a precious diamond. "This is... You..." Her eyes glowed with soft appreciation. "Thank you."

I'd learned over the years that it was the little things that Willow appreciated. Give her jewelry, fancy cars... She remained unimpressed. But when it came to a cherished shade of nail polish named *Willow Green*, she was under your spell. Not that I completely understood her obsession with nail polish.

She placed the bottle on the side table and turned to me with a wide smile. "Thank you so much. It's my favorite color."

"I know," I said, sliding my leather jacket off and hooking it over the chair. "Let's do this, then."

I took the knife and began cutting the vegetables, following her orders on slicing and dicing.

"You know, you're the only woman who orders me around," I teased, bumping my shoulder against hers. "Why do I keep hanging out with you when you put me to work every time I see you?"

I thought back to two months ago, when she had me grating cheese and washing lettuce. Then how she made me sit through a torturous meal where I watched Stuart sweet-talk her into seeing him again.

"You must be a masochist," she retorted jokingly, pulling me back to the present.

I laughed again. "Not exactly."

She nodded, then shot me a sidelong look. "No stalker ladies to rescue you from lately?"

I scoffed.

"Hell no. I'm done with that."

Willow only hummed.

I paused my knife work and turned to her. She looked gorgeous in her simple black leggings and a bloodred, loosely fitted T-shirt that came down to her mid-thighs. "Are you missing our routine?"

Willow was my go-to whenever I had to get rid of a particularly clingy girlfriend. It worked like a charm every time, and it helped that Willow could be like a little pit bull when she wanted to be.

She just looked at me, shaking her head. Something felt off.

"I haven't known you to keep silent when something's bothering you," I reprimanded. "Don't start now."

She hummed again. "I'm just surprised women can resist all of your six feet five inches of muscle, your sparkling personality, and your charisma."

"You're resisting it," I noted grumpily.

Willow laughed under her breath. "Ah, but we're just friends."

"We're more than that," I said instantly. "We're best friends."

*We should be more than friends*, I wanted to say, but it seemed like the wrong time. It might come across like I wanted her only because she was unavailable.

She sighed wistfully, then resumed chopping her vegetables, her eyes trained on the bowl in front of her. "Stuart proposed."

My heart stopped. Full-fucking-stop.

"He... W-what?" Fuck, stuttering was a first.

"Stuart proposed," Willow reiterated, bumping me softly with her hip as she blew a lock of auburn hair from her face. "And I accepted."

I swallowed, then swallowed again. A knot was forming in my throat, and that same feeling that came over me in Byron's office yesterday was ever-present.

"You... he... I..." I failed to find the words as my heart gave a painful thud. Ten years ago, I rejected her. I stood by it being the best thing for her, even now. She deserved better than what I had to offer back then. Was too pure for my sexual desires. Yet, as I stared at her now, I battled with the realization that I'd made the wrong decision.

For the first time ever, I wasn't sure how to get what I wanted. *Her*.

Her beautiful eyes flicked to mine before she returned them to the spot in front of her.

"Don't do it, Willow," I finally whispered, my heart clenching. "You're too good for him."

"Royce, that sounds dangerously close to what you've said before, if you can remember that far back," she warned with a groan, referring to the night she kissed me—the same night I relived over and over in my head. If only she knew. "I'm almost twenty-nine."

I shrugged one shoulder. “And I’m thirty-nine. What’s your point?”

Acid ate at this organ in my chest, turning it into a corroded battery.

“Are you happy?” I forced myself to ask around the bitterness on my tongue.

Something flickered across her expression, but before I could zero in on it, she whispered a barely audible, “Yes. But I don’t want to lose you.”

I lowered my head and pressed a kiss to her cheek. “Your happiness is all that matters. If you need me, I’ll be here. We might not see each other all the time, but you’ll always have me. From a distance. From the shadows. Forever.”

She lifted on her tiptoes and brushed her lips over my cheek, then whispered softly, “Thank you, Royce.”

Turning back to the counter, we worked silently for a bit, the scent of fresh vegetables, olive oil, and wintergreen perfuming the air around us. I wanted to open my heart and tell her not to marry Stuart. To give the idea of us a chance.

But deep down, I knew I was too late.

So I resolved to be the best friend I could possibly be. Once the salad was made, we turned at the same time, facing each other, and I took her in my arms, salad bowl and all.

“Husband or not... If he hurts you, I’ll end him,” I vowed, holding on to her just a bit longer.

## Chapter 4

### Royce



**T**hese nuptials would be the death of me.

Beer in hand, I stood off to the side and leaned against the window, watching people mingle across the large terrace that overlooked the Atlantic Ocean. The breeze carried the soft tones of Chopin through the air—Willow’s favorite composer. We always joked that beer and Chopin went perfectly together, yet she wasn’t drinking beer today. Since I’d arrived, she’d stuck only to sparkling water.

Her fiancé, on the other hand, was on his fourth glass of whiskey.

“Engagement party,” I muttered under my breath, scoffing.

I didn’t like it. Not. At. All.

As much as Willow was my rescue from a clingy girlfriend, I was hers to call upon when she needed saving. We were each other’s plus-ones for all the annoying events we had to attend.

My best friend belonged to me. No man had ever lasted long enough to be a threat.

Until now.

My gaze found the couple across the terrace, standing with some idiot who kept kissing Willow’s hand and beaming at her engagement ring.

If I were her man, I’d punch that motherfucker in the face.

I groaned inwardly, scolding myself. I had to stop thinking this way. My eyes locked on her petite frame, and my chest squeezed at the idea of losing her.

At five foot three, Willow was every man’s wet dream. A knockout and so fucking beautiful it hurt to look at her sometimes. She was the perfect

blend of both her parents—Portuguese mother and French father. Her Portuguese heritage shone through her deep chestnut hair, which was tied back today, her auburn highlights glistening under the afternoon sun. She was blessed with beautiful ivory skin, light freckles across her narrow nose, and a slim body with curves in all the right places. And then there was her smile, the kind that blinded everyone around her.

The girl had grown into a woman who would put any man's sanity to the test.

My thoughts flickered to that day in my living room, the credits of a movie I didn't watch a second of rolling across my TV. I wondered if she thought about it as much as I did, if she wished that night would have taken a slightly different turn.

But then we probably wouldn't have the friendship we had today.

Willow's melodious laugh snatched my attention back to her and her fiancé. They stood closer now, with a different couple, and I listened to her recount her romantic proposal in vivid detail.

I'd heard it before, of course, but that didn't stop me from wanting to throw up a bit in my mouth. Apparently the fucker sang the question like some kind of musical. I'd rather shut my dick in a car door than do something so publicly humiliating.

I glared at her fiancé who'd been glued to Willow's side for the past hour like a damn blood-sucking leech. I was pulling at all my willpower here, fighting the urge to kill a man who'd done no wrong.

Well, aside from touching my girl.

All in all, it was a happy day. The birds chirped and kids ran around the caterers' legs, laughing and smiling. All the while, I silently prayed, inviting a goddamned thunderstorm. In fact, it'd be the perfect day if lightning struck the fucking fiancé and gave Willow a break from his octopus hands.

Sailor—Willow and my sister Aurora's best friend—appeared next to me. "Hey, Royce."

"Hey." I wasn't in the mood for company.

"I bet you're proud, huh?"

Narrowing my eyes on Sailor, I snapped, "Why?"

She blinked, confusion crossing her face.

"Well, you introduced Willow to Stuart." Ah, yes. Then there was that. Stuart might've been a buddy once, but he was now my number one enemy. If only I could go back to that night and ignore his interruption. Send him

and that fucking pineapple cake packing. Instead, idiot me invited the fucker into my penthouse and let him join us for dinner.

“They look so in love,” Sailor purred, as if she were egging me on. My grip on my beer tightened, threatening to shatter it into a million pieces. “You probably know they’re planning on expediting the wedding.”

I whipped around to face her. “What?”

My outrage drew a few curious gazes, including from Willow’s parents, who were making their way toward me. Fuck!

“You didn’t know?” Sailor questioned with furrowed brows. “I thought you two shared everything.”

“Apparently not,” I grumbled dryly.

“She probably planned to tell you today. The wedding’s happening tomorrow.”

“*Tomorrow?*” I hissed in disbelief. “Why the fuck would they do that?”

She shrugged. “I guess they’re eager to make it official.”

I couldn’t ask her any more questions because she turned to greet Willow’s parents. “Mr. and Mrs. Auclair. So nice to see you again. Retirement suits you.”

Mrs. Auclair chuckled in that melodious way her daughter had picked up.

“Retirement in Portugal suits us,” she answered. She turned her eyes—the same unusual color as Willow’s—my way with a puzzling look. “Royce, is something wrong?”

Everything was wrong, starting with that ring on Willow’s finger. “No, Mrs. Auclair.” I shook hands with her husband. “I must agree with Sailor. You both look well.”

Sailor excused herself just as Mr. Auclair slapped me on the back. “It’s the air here, son.”

He’d always called me that. Would he call Willow’s fiancé that too? Shit, why was I jealous?

“Maybe I should consider moving here, then,” I joked, but something about my words had Willow’s parents exchanging a glance.

Someone switched up the music to some rap song, and the atmosphere changed instantly. Willow’s parents and I turned to glare at the culprit, finding a swaying Stuart issuing instructions to the DJ with an arm strung lazily over a waitress’s shoulders. Was this asshole serious?

My gaze flicked to Willow, whose attention was on my sister and her family. Her white top bared her smooth shoulders, and tiny diamonds glittered on her ears. Almond-shaped eyes twinkled as she smiled at something her uncle said, and her lush lips broke into a smile. As I stood here admiring her long hair falling in loose waves around her heart-shaped face and down her back, it occurred to me that she already looked like a bride.

I exhaled deeply, my heart squeezing painfully.

“Royce, can I beg a favor?” Mr. Auclair’s accented voice pulled my attention back to him and his wife, the latter eyeing me with worry over the rim of her glass.

“Sure.”

Mr. Auclair cleared his throat, glancing around us uncomfortably. “Can you...” He fiddled with his cufflinks and shifted on his feet.

Intrigued by his state of obvious stress, I gave him my undivided attention and patiently waited for him to continue. When he didn’t, his wife chimed in, “We think something is wrong.”

“Like what?”

“We’re not sure, but something’s off,” Willow’s mother stated. “You’re Special Forces?”

“Was.”

“Did you serve with Stuart?” Mr. Auclair asked.

I shook my head. “He was an Army Ranger, I was in the Marines, but we occasionally crossed paths.”

“He’s too old of her,” Mrs. Auclair said as she downed her drink, her critical eyes on her future son-in-law. I would have agreed with her, but that would make me a hypocrite because Stuart and I were the same age.

Willow’s father let out an exasperated breath. “No, it’s not that and you know it, *mon chéri*. It’s the fact that Willow is hiding something.”

Now that was something I agreed with them on. In the past month, Willow had grown more distant. None of my surveillance details had flagged anything. I’d scoured our message thread for any red flags, but aside from her becoming distant, I had nothing concrete to point to. I’d come up empty.

“What makes you say she’s hiding something?” I asked. I wasn’t dumb enough to tell them I suspected it too. If it turned out to be nothing, they’d be left disappointed.

“He’s forcing her to push up the wedding. Why the sudden rush? Willow initially said she wanted a long engagement.”

My brain ticked off all the reasons someone would expedite a wedding, and one stood out above the rest. I didn’t like it.

“Did you ask her?”

“We did,” Mrs. Auclair answered. “She just said Stuart wants it and that it’s for the best.”

“They’ve only been dating three months,” her father hissed. “It shouldn’t be like this.”

“Shhh.” Mrs. Auclair blushed as she scolded us. “She’s coming.”

“Say you’ll talk to her,” her father whispered. “You’ve known her longer than that idiot.”

I fucking loved her parents. “I’ll see what I can figure out,” I assured them both right before Willow joined us, her face slightly flushed. She seemed agitated.

“Hey, you three,” she greeted us. “Why does it look like you’re up to something?”

“Because we are.” It felt right to speak the half-truth. The full truth would sound a little different: *We’re trying to figure out how to snatch you away from that fucking asshat.*

Willow grimaced, glancing around erratically. “Have you seen Stuart?”

“Oh, sweetheart, did you lose him already?” Mrs. Auclair questioned. Willow blushed a deeper crimson, her décolleté blotching, which was a sure sign of agitation.

“Maybe we should delay the wedding,” Mr. Auclair blurted.

“Don’t be silly, Papà.” Willow stopped looking around and her lips thinned. I followed her gaze to where Stuart appeared, his hair a mess. It took exactly five heartbeats before the very same waitress appeared behind him, and my suspicion flared red hot.

Stuart staggered over and snaked a hand around Willow. She stiffened at my side, and my icy expression alone should have been enough to kill him on the spot. Much to my regret, it didn’t.

“Here you are,” he drawled. “I was looking for you.”

“You found me.” Willow couldn’t hide the apprehension in her body or voice, not from me and apparently not from her parents, who sneered at Stuart. They must have also seen him with the waitress and put two and two together.



“My parents want to speak to us,” he drawled, smiling like a fucking fool.

*You’d be smiling like that too if she were marrying you*, the devil on my shoulder whispered, but I promptly gagged him.

Willow flashed him a strained smile. “Let’s go, then.”

“*Você não pode falar com eles mais tarde? Mal vimos você esta semana.*” My Portuguese was rusty, but I could piece together enough to understand that Willow’s mother wanted more time with her—that neither of her parents had seen much of her this week. Mrs. Auclair wasn’t happy. Apparently the Harris bunch insisted Willow stay at the same hotel as them this week despite her parents having a house here.

“*Desculpe, Mãe.*” Willow reached out and squeezed her mother’s hand gently, her expression softening into one of reminiscence.

“Ah, Willy.” Fuck, I hated that nickname. Judging by their expressions, so did her parents, and so did Willow. “The correct way to pronounce it is de-co-lpe,” Stuart corrected her.

My shoulders stiffened.

“Willow’s Portuguese is as good as your English.” My tone was as dry as the Sahara Desert. “She’s fluent in both, so I’m fairly certain she knows the proper way to pronounce it.”

Willow smiled sweetly, her eyes narrowed on her future husband, and she added, “I like how you started Rosetta Stone this week and you’re an expert already.”

Obviously Stuart missed the heavy sarcasm in her tone because he leaned in and brushed his lips over hers. I was shocked when Willow didn’t punch him, and instead rolled her eyes.

Then the asshole dared to squeeze her ass, and a growl vibrated in my throat. A goddamned growl. What the fuck was I? A dog? Nevertheless, I wanted to go for his jugular and tear him apart. Or maybe just shoot him and kidnap the bride.

Now that would liven this party up.

I tuned the rest of his slurred words out. As much as it would satisfy me, I couldn’t risk murdering him right here in broad daylight.

Willow’s vibrant green eyes darted to me, and instantly, all my focus was on her. She reached for my hand and squeezed it, whether in admonishment or asking if everything was okay, I didn’t know.

“Royce, you good?” she asked, settling my internal debate.

“Splendid,” I retorted wryly. “The better question is, Willow, are *you* okay?”

Stuart snickered and I flicked him a glare, but before I could say anything else, he pulled her along.

“*Mãe*, want me to—”

“Don’t worry about us,” Willow’s mother urged. “We’ll be okay here with Royce.”

“But if you need us, you know where we are,” her father chimed in.

My best friend’s eyes locked with mine, and so much of the sparkle I was used to seeing in her eyes had dimmed. I didn’t like that at all. Fuck, she was mine to protect. Stuart was all wrong for her. I *needed* to watch over her.

I opened my mouth to protest, but Willow cut me off. “I’ll see you later. Yeah?”

She gave me a pointed look and I nodded. But Willow’s annoyance didn’t escape me, nor did the hissed “*Stop dragging me, I’m coming*” that was directed at her fiancé.

Thanks to my... surveillance, I knew which hotel Willow was staying at, and as I watched the newlyweds-to-be scramble toward Stuart’s parents, I decided I’d crash her “night before the wedding.” I had to talk to her.

“See what I mean?” Mr. Auclair said once they were out of earshot.

Before I could reply, his wife added, “If you want to... beat him up or... take her away and make her see reason, we won’t object.”

Did I just get a carte blanche to whisk their daughter away into the sunset?

Then she smiled sweetly, slipped her hand into her husband’s, and walked away, leaving me staring at their backs with my jaw on the perfectly manicured lawn.

## Chapter 5

### Willow



This engagement party was a fucking disaster for so many reasons. The main one being my fiancé.

I tried to hide behind grace and poise, but as the day went on, it became progressively harder. I'd pasted on my best fake smile all day and held my fiancé's arm, allowing him to make a fool out of me.

Again!

Passing the fountains set up throughout the terrace and the round tables draped with gold tablecloths and littered with champagne glasses, I heard the hushed pity and felt the judging eyes on my skin.

My parents, Royce, Aurora, and Sailor—and their doting husbands—were the only guests here for me. The remainder were strangers, people whose names I was learning today, at my *engagement* party.

Stuart never loosened his proprietary grip around my waist, leading me across the terrace like a prized medallion. Meanwhile, I considered my options on ending this engagement despite the little life growing inside me.

Hindsight was a bitch, because it couldn't be more painfully clear here, surrounded by strangers on what was supposed to be a joyous day, that this arrangement was doomed from the get-go.

Initially, I agreed to go out on a date with Stuart, believing he was the next best thing to Royce—my best friend who I secretly fantasized about when I needed to get off.

Unfortunately, I couldn't have been more wrong. Stuart didn't hold a candle to him. My best friend was a playboy; Stuart was a downright cheater and a liar. While Stuart made himself look smart by putting other

people down, Royce was sharp and deeply intelligent. It was what made him so dangerous. People were so focused on his muscles and swagger that they underestimated his genius mind.

And while I'd kept my distance for the past month, that genius mind had picked up on the fact that something was off between Stuart and me.

Ten years ago, I made the mistake of going to a party with a boyfriend I thought I could trust. It turned out to be one of the dumbest things I could've ever done, but like a prince, Royce swooped in and saved me.

Could he do it again?

Or would he forever discard me once he learned that Stuart had knocked me up?

My heart ached as I released a shuddering breath.

Life was made up of choices, and I regretted the one I made three months ago when I said yes to Stuart. In the first week of what was supposed to be a very brief relationship, I got pregnant. Even though we used protection every single time.

God sure had a funny sense of humor.

I was a pro-choice girl, except my mother's deep Catholic roots had a firmer hold on me than I anticipated. So, in an attempt to make things right, I was getting married.

But enough was enough.

I'd have this baby but not his father, otherwise the weight of everyone's stares—assessing me, judging me, pitying me—would be something I'd deal with for the rest of my life.

My fake smile faded by the time we reached Stuart's parents—an aged, pompous-looking couple who seemingly couldn't stand each other, which was so different from my own parents' relationship. Watching them was like a vision board for my future if I didn't fix this.

Stuart's grip on me tightened as he pulled me closer, murmuring in my ear, "Smile, baby mama." I turned to glance up at him and was met with a smug look. "We're stuck together forever."

I could see the blankness in his eyes, the unfeelingness, and goose bumps trailed down my neck. The longer I spent in his company, the clearer I could see his facade crumble. The man beneath the charismatic mask. The man who loved to wreak havoc everywhere he went, no matter with who.

He brushed a soft kiss against my lips, and it took all I had not to wipe my skin clean.

Nodding and saying hello to his parents, a congressman for the state of Delaware and his wife who looked constipated, the music switched back to a soft melody.

I glanced over my shoulder to find Royce leaving the DJ, his eyes meeting mine in a silent show of comfort.

“Ah, my son and future daughter-in-law,” Congressman Harris said in a deep voice. “Tomorrow better be perfection. The world’s watching us.”

Unease dripped down my spine.

Stuart nodded at him but didn’t comment.

“Fix your hair,” his mother scolded. “Discretion is paramount, Stuart.”

Congressman Harris turned his attention toward me, studying me critically. “Your parents got you a dress, right?”

“Yes,” I gritted, my hands curling into fists and my fingernails digging into the palms of my hands. It was another of Mr. and Mrs. Harris’s attributes. They were snobs. My parents weren’t anywhere near as loaded, and I refused to ask them to fork over the funds to cover this elaborate sham of a wedding. A fact that these assholes never failed to remind me of. “And they would have paid for the wedding if we’d kept it small like I wanted,” I reminded him, although I wasn’t sure why I bothered.

I’d made up my mind—Stuart and I would have a heart-to-heart tonight. There was no way in hell I was going through with this wedding.

## Chapter 6

### Royce



One gentlemanly act changed the course of my life.

Ten years ago, I turned Willow down because she was too young for me. Had too much of the world to still see. I'd known she'd had a crush on me for years back then, but she was my little sister's best friend. I'd known her during her high school years, when she wore braces and giggled along with Aurora when they saw a boy kissing a girl.

Karma was the ultimate bitch though.

Willow might have fallen for me first, but after that awkward moment ten years ago, she moved on, perfectly content with being friends.

I, on the other hand, had fallen in love with her. Actually, that seemed a pitiful way to describe what I felt. Not only did I fall for her, I continued to trip, trample, and nosedive.

"Fuck this gentleman shit," I muttered under my breath, bringing my beer to my lips as I watched Willow with her fiancé and his parents. She was too good for all of them, and I knew her well enough to know she couldn't stand them.

"What was that?"

"Fuck, Rora. Trying to give me a heart attack?" I grumbled as my sister appeared out of thin air. She'd become stealthy—the benefits of marrying a mobster, I supposed. Her husband, Alexei, knew how to hide in the shadows just like my brother Kingston, and it was freaky as fuck.

"You don't like Stuart," she stated, tilting her chin at the couple.

"What's there not to like? He's a dream come true." *Fucking not.*

Aurora laughed, although there was no amusement in it.

"I don't like him either," my sister hissed as I watched Willow's interaction with Stuart's parents. The congressman's gaze devoured Willow's body, and it made me sick. "Ever since Willow started dating him, she hasn't been the same."

"Has she said anything to you?" I questioned, my eyes still locked on the woman in question's sleek auburn hair and slender neck.

"She hasn't, but trust me, something's up."

Tonight, I'd learn what, and I'd get my best friend—my woman—back.

Three hours and five hundred euros later, I found myself standing in front of Willow's hotel room. She ghosted me and her friends. Again.

I called her, texted her, tried her hotel room—nothing. Knowing Willow and her Catholic traditions, she would have insisted on spending the evening before the wedding separate from her husband.

It was the perfect opportunity to get her alone.

I took a calming breath, then knocked. A soft shuffle sounded behind the door, then nothing but silence. After another three knocks came up empty, I pounded on the door.

"Willow, I know you're in there," I whisper-yelled, not wanting to alert Stuart if the fucker was on the same floor. Another faint noise. "I'm not going anywhere, so you better open this door."

I raised my hand again, but the door opened before I could make contact again, and an unfamiliar face appeared. Blonde hair, blue eyes. Definitely not Willow.

"Who the fuck are you?"

The woman's cheeks flushed. "This is my room."

I shook my head. "Impossible, the front desk told me this is my"—the word *woman* was on the tip of my tongue, but I swallowed it—"friend's room."

The woman shrugged. "Well, it's my room, and I'm certainly not your friend." Her eyes roamed over my body as she licked her lips. "But if you want—"

"No," I cut her off, turning on my heel.

Nothing had gone my way ever since I learned of these fucking nuptials.

## Chapter 7

### Willow



**R**egret was heavy as I sat in Stuart's hotel room, watching him pace like a caged animal.

"Listen, Stuart," I started when it was obvious he wouldn't initiate this conversation. "It's obvious we're incompatible. The fact that you brought that woman to my room and expected a threesome the night before our wedding only proves it."

He came to an abrupt stop before me, glaring at me.

"It was for you," he bellowed.

I gritted my teeth. The last thing I wanted was to start a fight. I'd seen Stuart lose his temper once. It wasn't directed at me, but at my boss. It cost me my job and, most likely, my career. Showbiz didn't put up with hotheaded, arrogant assholes like Stuart. Nonetheless, it wasn't pretty, and I wasn't sticking around to witness it again.

"No, Stuart," I said firmly. "Threesomes aren't my thing, and I have never given you any indication that they are. *And*, in case you've forgotten, I'm pregnant."

The moment the words left my lips, I silently kicked myself. I lowered my gaze down to the beautiful dress I was wearing, focusing on the orchid motif. It was my *mãe's* dress, and before that, my *grandmère's*. Feeling foolish and superstitious, I chose it in hopes that it would bring me good luck on the eve of our wedding. Like I said—foolish.

I'd known all along it was wrong to accept Stuart's proposal. It was the reason behind the countless restless nights I'd tossed and turned this last



month. Ever since Royce visited me at my parents', I hadn't been able to shake the nervous energy coursing through my veins.

My body tingled every time he'd brushed against me. That alone should have been the sign that Stuart wasn't meant for me. I believed myself to be a loyal woman—having more-than-platonic feelings for my long-time friend wasn't something a soon-to-be bride should have to grapple with.

As much as I liked to think I was over him and that his charms didn't affect me, my heart sped up whenever I recalled that kiss. And lately, it had been a lot. Too much.

I mean... ten fucking years. It shouldn't still be on my mind.

Why did Royce affect me so?

I was deep in my head, ruminating on the hopelessness of this whole thing, when a sudden rustle had me whirling around.

A thud pierced the air and pain exploded in my head. I lost my balance, sliding off the chair as the room spun around me. My eyes burned, and when I finally came to my senses, I was on my knees with a terrible rug burn.

Before I could look up, another slap followed and my head lolled to the side.

"You can't leave me." I looked at Stuart's bloodred face, veins bulging out the side of his neck. His voice sounded distant, but I realized he had to be yelling.

At that moment, I realized I'd made the biggest mistake of all, but it was too late. The next blow to my face had me seeing stars. From the corner of my eye, I spotted Stuart's leather loafer coming toward me, and I instinctively curled over to protect my stomach. His foot slammed into my back, knocking the air out of me.

Stuart's shoe connected with my back again and I bit my tongue to swallow my scream. He was in a blind rage. This was it, I thought. I was going to die. Another punch came in, this one hitting my skull, and then another.

A metallic taste flooded my mouth, but I didn't let out a sound. I lay there in the fetal position, my head pounding like a jackhammer, my limbs aching.

It wasn't until I heard the heavy slam of the hotel door that I realized Stuart was gone.

The need to remain still and wait for the pain to disappear was great, but the fear of Stuart coming back was far greater.

With shaky fingers, I reached for the couch's footrest and pulled myself up. I didn't know how I managed to stand, but I did. I snatched Stuart's discarded trench coat from the bed, wrapped it around myself, and slowly made my way out of his hotel room.

Pain exploded in my joints and my face throbbed like every bone in my cheek was fractured, but I ignored it all as I struggled to see out of my swollen eye.

The elevator was on the opposite side of the hallway, so I took the stairs by his room despite the ache shooting through me with each step.

Logically, I knew a hospital or my parents were the reasonable choices, but I'd rather die than explain this to anyone.

I didn't know how long it took me to exit the hotel or how long I walked, but my legs felt unsteady and the pain was becoming even more excruciating, if that were possible.

Finally, a man with gray hair and dark eyes stopped me, a look of compassion on his face.

"Should I call the police?"

"No... Not th-the p-police," I blurted out through swollen lips.

I kept moving, ignoring the man shouting behind me. Suddenly a car came to a stop, right along with my heart.

The door opened and I blinked several times, fighting to clear my blurry vision. The man didn't look familiar, but that could've been my injuries causing confusion.

"Miss, take the taxi. I pay." I managed to turn in the direction of the voice, finding the same older man watching me with dark eyes.

He took me gently by my elbow and guided me into the cab, then in fluent Portuguese, he instructed the driver to take me wherever I wanted, handing him a stack of bills.

My eyes burned at his kindness, the first hot tear rolling down my face, stinging in its wake.

"Thank you," I croaked.

"Take care of yourself," he said, placing something in my palm. "If you need help, this is my card."

The door shut and the taxi started moving, and I finally looked and caught the driver watching me through the rearview mirror.

“Where to, miss?”

I blurted the address in Portuguese, my tongue heavy in my mouth. Thankfully, he seemed to understand me.

I fell back against the leather seat, fighting the urge to close my eyes and drift asleep. I just needed to get to the only person I trusted to keep this a secret and keep me safe.

My chest clenched at the knowledge that I could have avoided this from the get-go. Instead, I was a stupid woman who convinced herself this was her best chance at a happy future, despite all the warnings and red flags.

“We’re here, miss,” the driver said, his voice sounding tinny and distant.

The car stopped, and I lifted my head, sighing in relief. I was met by old stone walls and a black metal gate. Royce’s home in Lisbon.

The driver exited and rounded the car to open my door. I wrenched my feet onto the cobblestone, using the door to keep me steady. It took every ounce of strength I had to take those few steps to the gate without doubling over in pain.

Just as I lost my footing and began to topple over, a set of strong, warm arms caught me mid-free fall.

“Willow?” Royce stared down at me, fury and outrage lacing his features. “Who did this to you?” he gritted. “Fucking who?”

My fingers dug into his arms, and I swallowed painfully. *Finally*, I was safe.

“I... had nowhere else to go...” Panic overtook me again when I realized that wasn’t exactly right. “Don’t... don’t let my parents see me like this.”

And then the darkness whisked me away.

## Chapter 8

### Royce



**A**fter my unsuccessful attempt to find Willow at the hotel, I came back home to find her stumbling toward my front gate, beaten and bruised.

The sight had rendered me speechless—I couldn't remember a time I'd felt so viscerally angry. She sported a swollen eye, split and weeping blood, a bruised cheek, and a fat lip. Someone had hit her. No—not just hit her. She'd been beaten, attacked.

I paced the length of my bedroom while Willow slept on the bed, her body a canvas of bruises. I got in touch with a doctor, and twenty minutes after the taxi pulled away, he was finally wrapping up his examination.

She'd been falling in and out of consciousness, but she'd yet to say another word.

I waited with bated breath for the doctor to give me his diagnosis.

"She's been brutally assaulted," Dr. Rodrigues stated, and I had to grit my teeth, fighting the urge to snap at him for stating the obvious.

"Anything else?" I gritted, every sick and twisted possibility flashing in my mind. My chest squeezed as I ran a hand through my hair, squashing my irritation and ignoring the revulsion in my stomach. This was no time to behave like a Neanderthal.

"No obvious signs of sexual assault." The doctor must have read my worry. "But there can be no guarantee until we speak with her." He shifted on the bed and leaned over her. "I must ask you for privacy so I can attend to her injuries."

Oh, fucking *hell* no.

“Not happening.” My expression turned dark and I locked eyes with the doctor. “She’s family.” *Practically.*

Dr. Rodrigues’s eyes lit up. “In that case, let me proceed.”

He took off his gloves, declaring there weren’t any injuries that would require surgery, but that he would be monitoring her condition over the coming hours and days. He applied a cream to the cuts on her face and moved on to her clenched hand. He had to peel her fingers open to extract the card that was clutched in her palm.

My brow furrowed as I reached for it and read it aloud. “Kian Cortes. Security.”

Willow’s eyes fluttered open, and the card was immediately forgotten. I dropped to my haunches and took her hand in mine.

“Royce.” Her voice was weak, her lips barely moving.

“I’m here, baby.” The raging possessiveness I felt toward her spread through me like wildfire. “Tell me what you need.”

“M-my parents—” She licked her bottom lip and winced. “Don’t let them see me like this.”

That might be hard considering her wedding was tomorrow and her parents had plans to see her in the morning. But if the suspicion in the pit of my stomach was correct, she’d marry that bastard over my dead body.

“Who did this to you?” I demanded softly.

The doctor cleared his throat, reminding us he was in the room. “Miss, I’m Dr. Rodrigues.” Willow nodded, hesitantly. “I wanted to discuss the extent of your injuries with you.”

Willow’s eyes shifted to me, her bruised lip trembling, and my heart twisted like a knife had been edged into it.

“Royce, can you give us some privacy?” She reached down to draw her patient gown tighter across her chest, and the fury bubbling through my veins burned hotter. She must have picked up on my assumption because her eyes widened and she rushed to say, “No, not for that reason. I wasn’t... No one touched me like that.”

Relief washed over me like ice on a hot summer’s day, but it didn’t ease my thirst for vengeance. Nobody touched those I loved and got away with it.

It took everything in me to grant her her privacy. She deserved it, so I pushed my raging need to be in her presence down into the pit of my soul. She didn’t need to witness me punching walls right now.

I pressed a kiss to her bruised knuckles. “If you need me, I’ll be right outside the door.”

Once in the corridor, I dropped my hands to my knees and took a few deep breaths. Contemplating the best way to commit murder was the only thing keeping my feet grounded. I needed a name—although I suspected it—and then all bets would be off.

If I had to go to prison, so be it, but Stuart fucking Harris would never lay eyes on Willow again. As I scrubbed a hand down my face, my mind churned, exploring my options. When it came to keeping the people in my life safe, I knew I could be illogical, but my sense of responsibility for Willow was hitting harder than ever before.

Just as I was about to pull out my phone and call my brother, the door to my bedroom opened and Dr. Rodrigues’s headful of white hair appeared.

“She’s resting,” he declared before I had a chance to say anything. “She’ll need to take it easy for at least a week.”

“Are you prescribing any medications?” I asked.

“I’ve left all necessary information with Ms. Auclair.”

I eyed him suspiciously. “And she wasn’t sexually assaulted?”

“She was not,” he confirmed, then he hitched the strap of his satchel up his shoulder and disappeared in the direction of my front door.

With Dr. Rodrigues gone, I went back into my bedroom, where my gaze fixated on her sleeping form, her skin already developing into shades of black. While her injuries would heal, it still sat fucking wrong with me that she was hurt. Nobody should have ever laid a finger on her—fucking ever.

I supposed a part of me knew, deep down, that my concern for her safety had originated that night all those years ago. When she’d shared with me what her vile ex-boyfriend had done, and the vulnerability I’d seen in her as the night went on. When she’d surprised me by planting that kiss, I chalked it up to her being in a heightened emotional state. But I still remembered how soft her lips were, how she tasted, and the way her tongue tangled with mine—regardless of whether she knew the full extent she had on me, that kiss had sealed it. I vowed from then on to look out for her.

For the next three hours, I paced my bedroom, working out a plan. I called my brother-in-law, Alexei, who in turn called in a few favors, which was the only reason I was now watching footage from earlier in the night. My own surveillance gave me access to CCTV from the common areas of Willow’s hotel, but she hadn’t taken the elevator when she fled, and the

camera near the exit she took wasn't working. Alexei pulled strings and had footage from nine different angles sent over within the hour.

Stuart must have been the one to hurt her. He was known for his temper, and if the assault had been random, she wouldn't have run out of the hotel like the devil was on her heels. She would have sought help.

I watched her move through the streets on unsteady feet, her face wet with tears and blood. I followed her movements until a man noticed Willow's concerning state. He stopped her and they exchanged a few words, then he hurried her into a cab. He looked vaguely familiar, and it wasn't until I saw him place his card in her hand that the puzzle fell into place. *Kian Cortes.*

He was the Brazilian who'd started a security company and had connections to the Cortes cartel. I watched as Kian stood with his arms crossed over his chest as the cab that eventually brought her here sped away.

A moan ripped from Willow's lips, and I homed in on her form. She shifted in her sleep, then opened her beautiful eyes, blinking once... twice.

"Royce," she whispered, then winced, probably due to the cut on her bottom lip, which shot another dose of rage through me.

"Morning, baby," I said softly, leaning over her to brush a loose strand of hair from her face. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I've been run over by a freight train."

"I..." She blinked again, then averted her eyes, suddenly very interested in her surroundings. I sat down on the edge of the bed and leaned over her, taking her chin gently between my fingers. "You came to me for help, bruised and beaten." She opened her swollen lips, then closed them without saying a word. "Let me help you." She sucked in a breath, looking pained as her eyes misted over. "Baby, don't you trust me?"

"I... do. I'm just so..." She attempted to sit up, shuddered, then slumped her shoulders in defeat. "Embarrassed."

I cupped her face with firm yet gentle hands. The thought of hurting her made me want to sink onto the floor and let the earth swallow me whole. Willow was already a fragile woman, her delicate bones more suited for a ballerina than a fighter, although her inner strength always stared back.

"You have no reason to be." She released a soft sound, lifting her gaze and zeroing in on a spot above my head. She stared at nothing, her

stubbornness shining through. “Now, sweetheart, you better tell me who the fuck hurt you or I swear I’m going to lose my goddamned mind.”

“You really have a way with words,” she croaked, her lips trembling.

“Who did this?” I growled, causing her to flinch, and I immediately forced myself to take a deep breath. I wouldn’t—couldn’t—scare her. She came to me for help.

This time, she reached out her hands and cupped my face. Her eyes found mine and she shook her head. “Royce, please—”

“The name,” I gritted, cutting her off. My mouth tightened, anger shooting through my veins as I waited for her to confirm what I knew in my gut.

She touched my cheek, her hand cool against my simmering fury. “Please don’t worry about it. I’m fine now.”

I softened my eyes, urging her to see how close I was to losing it. “Don’t you trust me?”

A shuddering breath left her. “I do, but I’m... I don’t want to—” She hiccupped. “I can’t talk about it.”

“I need the name, Willow,” I begged, my resolve shaking. I wanted to hear her say it. “If you trust me, you’ll give me the name.”

“I do trust you.”

“Then please, do this. For me.”

“Promise you won’t do anything.” Her green eyes shone with unshed tears. “I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

“I won’t get in trouble.” But I *would* do something about it. “Now please, tell me who hurt you.”

“Stuart.”

One word. One name. One fucker who was about to die.



## Chapter 9

### Willow



Tears filled my eyes as I placed a palm on my stomach, grateful for this second chance.

Before he left, the doctor confirmed that the baby was healthy, and he prescribed prenatal vitamins. His assurance sent a sense of relief through me. I'd never put my baby at risk for the sake of appearances again. All my reasons for marrying Stuart had vanished—no, turned to ashes, and there wasn't an ounce of regret. My sixth sense had been going off about Stuart for weeks, but like a fool, I'd ignored it. I'd seen the signs and, like a woman blinded by hope, I convinced myself I was wrong. It almost cost me the little life growing inside me.

I risked a glance at Royce, tension rolling off him in waves while silence dominated the room.

I averted my gaze again, heavy shame suffocating me. I knew now that I'd never felt true, genuine feelings for Stuart. And yet, once I'd found out about the baby, I convinced myself that marrying him was the right thing to do.

If I hadn't... If I'd followed my gut feeling, it wouldn't have come to this.

Without another word, Royce reached for the bottle on the nightstand and proceeded to lather ointment on my skin, covering the bruises. His movements were methodical, never causing pain or discomfort.

But the ache in my chest made up for it.

"How many times has he hurt you before?" Royce's voice was soft, but it was impossible to miss the warning in it. "I'm guessing this wasn't the

first.”

“Royce, please don’t—”

“Willow, I’m already in a state where I’m prepared to commit mass murder. Please don’t excuse that bastard’s actions.”

He was right, of course. There was nothing I would or could say to justify what Stuart did to me. Not when I had this baby to look out for. A baby I already loved.

“It’s the first time he’s ever put a hand on me,” I finally said, holding his eyes so he could see the truth in them. “But I’ve seen glimpses of his temper, and I should have known better than to ignore them.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” he demanded, and I wished there was a simple answer. If I hadn’t gotten knocked up, I probably would have. But this little life growing inside me had changed everything. “Willow, I thought we were friends.”

He got me there, but in my defense, I hadn’t said a word to Aurora or Sailor either. Call it shame or call it longing for a different reality. I’d watched my best friends fall in love with men who worshiped the ground they walked on. Sure, they were mafia men, but still. You couldn’t fault the way they made my girls their top priority.

And there I was getting knocked up by an idiot because I had to go and have a fling during a dry spell.

“I’m scared of losing you,” I finally admitted.

“You’ll never lose me.” He brushed the tip of his nose against mine. “I’m here. For you.” He wrapped his strong arms around me and squeezed gently. I’d never felt safer than I did right now. “Nobody will ever hurt you again.”

“I should have never agreed to marry him,” I mumbled. “I knew it was a mistake from the very start.”

“Why did you, then?”

A heartbeat of silence passed before I whispered, “Because I’m pregnant.”

“Pregnant?” he repeated, his voice eerily calm.

I swallowed the lump in my throat, then nodded, unable to find my voice. Up until Stuart went ballistic, there’d been a tiny part of me that regretted being pregnant. Stuart wasn’t the right man. It wasn’t the right time. The circumstances were less than ideal.

But now, that regret was gone. My instincts had flared when Stuart's temper threatened my baby. I knew now, without an ounce of doubt, that I'd protect my child at all costs.

"Yes, Royce," I stated calmly, despite the turmoil in my chest. "I'm pregnant."

"He hit you knowing you're pregnant." I couldn't tell whether it was a question or a statement, but Royce's face became a blank mask while dark, threatening shadows danced in his eyes. "I'm going to kill him," he stated matter-of-factly.

His volatile words made my chest clench. I couldn't let Royce get into trouble on my account, no matter how much I wanted revenge.

"You're not going to kill him," I retorted calmly.

"Oh yes, I am." He jumped off the bed and started stomping around the room like a caged animal. Then suddenly he stopped, his dark eyes landing on me. "Will you be okay alone for an hour?"

I jolted upright, then slid off the bed, ignoring the way my body screamed out. The moment my feet hit the plush rug, the room started to spin.

"Whoa." I flopped my arms around to catch on to something to hold myself up before Royce caught me. "Okay, I didn't see that coming," I mumbled, trying to blink away the black dots in my vision.

"I don't know how," Royce spat angrily. "You've been physically assaulted, and if that weren't already enough—you're *pregnant*. Get back in bed."

Squaring my shoulders, I glared at him. "I'm stronger than I look, Royce, and don't think for a minute that you can boss me around."

A tense second passed before his shoulders slumped. "Fine. Willow, please, for the love of God, get back in bed and rest."

I held his gaze. "Only if you promise to rest next to me."

His brows furrowed. "Later. Right now, I have to—"

"You have to go murder someone," I cut him off exasperatedly. "Yeah, I know. And that's the exact reason I'm either going with you, or you're going to stay here with me."

"No."

I jutted my chin out stubbornly. "Yes."

"Willow—"

“Royce.” We glared at each other, our battle of wills playing tug-of-war, neither one of us willing to cave. My head was pounding, but I wasn’t going to let him catch on to that. “So what’s it going to be?” I finally broke the silence.

“You need a stress-free environment in your condition.”

I nodded. “Agreed.”

He flashed me a satisfied smile. “I knew you’d see things my way.”

I rolled my eyes. “You misunderstand. I agreed that I need a stress-free environment. So to make things a bit less stressful for me, I have to insist that we stay together. I’m not ready to tell anyone what happened, and I can admit that I need someone by my side until I’m back on my feet.” He stared at me, blinking furiously, confusion in his eyes. I sighed. “You’re my security blanket, Royce,” I said. “So if you want to beat up Stuart, I want to come with you.” I could argue that Stuart wasn’t worth it, but I knew Royce well enough that he wouldn’t let it go. So I’d support him on this one, partly because the bastard deserved a good beating. “And I’ll be there to ensure you don’t kill him.”

“Are you worried about Stuart?”

“No, I’m worried about you,” I snapped. “If you do kill him, or beat him severely enough, you’ll likely have to disappear. I want to be with you so we can hide together. Besides, my stuff is at the hotel.”

I held my breath, watching him ponder my words as he sat down and ran his hand through his hair.

“Pregnant,” he said, almost as if he was testing the word. I nodded, and he leveled me with a glare. “I’m furious you didn’t come to me sooner!”

I blinked in confusion.

“Excuse me?” I hissed with indignation.

“I thought you fucking trusted me,” he said, accusation clear in his voice.

“First of all, I don’t like your attitude, so you better chill the fuck out,” I spewed, rubbing my still-flat belly. “And I do trust you.” He scoffed as if he didn’t believe me. “I know you’re in shock; so was I when I found out. But regardless, you will show me some respect.” Royce looked at me, his lip twitching slightly. “And no, you won’t distract me from our conversation. If you’re going to the hotel, you’re taking me with you. Otherwise, you’re staying here where I can keep an eye on you.”

Tension twisted between us, weaving its invisible rope until it wrapped around my chest tightly, making it hard to breathe. My knuckles turned white, but I refused to avert my eyes as the moment stretched into eternity.

“Fine,” he finally agreed, and my breath left me with a *whoosh*. “But you’re getting some sleep first. We’ll go before dawn.”

“Okay.” I would agree to anything right now as long as he didn’t leave without me. Well, almost anything.

“And I’m carrying you to my car, then to the hotel room, and then back to the car. If anyone tries anything, I’m shooting first and asking questions later.”

His words should have made me feel nauseous, but they didn’t. For better or worse, Royce made me feel safe.

“Agreed.”

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## Chapter 10

### Royce



I remained by Willow's side while she slept, observing the bruises and marks on her face. Fury flickered in my chest all over again, eager to beat the crap out of Stuart, end his life—except for the damn promise I made.

From the moment Willow told me about her pregnancy, a burning ember of resentment found its way into my heart. I hated Stuart, but I hated myself even more. And then there was this overwhelming feeling of guilt. If it wasn't for me, he would have never met her. I should have never allowed the assface to get close to Willow.

I'd never felt such fierce affection for any other woman. I'd never wanted anything to be mine so much that it fucking hurt my chest. Yes, I knew there was a laundry list of reasons why wanting her was wrong—she was having a baby that wasn't mine, she was my baby sister's best friend. There was also no way she was into the kinky shit I was, and would probably be disgusted by me if she ever found out. But I couldn't make myself stop caring for her. If she'd let me, I'd worship her until my dying breath.

As the morning crept and dawn neared, true to my vow, I woke Willow up and carried her to my car.

I flicked a glance her way, at her small form slumped against the leather seat of the Land Rover. Thankfully my brother-in-law had left his car during one of his visits, so I took the liberty of using it this morning. It was a more comfortable option for Willow than my sports car, not to mention safer.

She was fucking beautiful, wearing a pair of leggings that belonged to my sister and the white dress shirt I'd worn to her party. Even with bruises marring her usually flawless skin, Willow was a fucking vision to behold. Her lush dark curls framed her plump cheeks, and something tugged at my heart. It was always like this with her, and I'd been a fool to miss my chance.

She was mine, and that baby growing inside her should have been mine. I'd let time slip away, and I had no one to blame but myself. What a fucking fool I'd been.

Over the years, no matter where in the world we were, something always drew us back together. I was too stupid—and too blind—to see she had a hold on me.

It wasn't love. It couldn't be. However, it was a maddening feeling that refused to ease.

Willow's gaze slid over to me as I shifted gears, making my way to the hotel. The anger ignited in my chest every time I thought of that fucker Stuart, and every mile that brought us closer to our destination heightened it.

My hands curled so tight around the steering wheel that the leather cracked in protest.

"Royce." Her whisper was enough to cut straight through my fury. Our gazes locked for only a moment, but a knowing gleam shone in her eyes. "You're mad. I'm mad too. But please don't be reckless."

I hid a smile at how well she knew me. "I promise, but it's about time someone taught that fucker a lesson."

"Agreed," she answered, nodding. "To a degree." After a heartbeat of silence, she continued, "And please don't pull the big-brother scolding tactic with him."

My good mood faded at her words. The fact that she'd refer to me as a brother irked me.

"Big brother?" I said, my voice eerily calm.

She offered me a tired smile. "You know what I mean."

"No, I don't know." She was never one to hold back, so I kept my expression neutral as I added, "You'll have to enlighten me."

She let out a heavy sigh. "Please don't lose your temper. You've always been overprotective and it's what I like about you, but I don't want you to

end up in trouble because of me. Stuart made his bed, it is time he lie in it. However, not at the expense of your freedom.”

“Do you want any kind of support from him in terms of—”

“No.”

A cursory glance at her confirmed she meant it, and my expression softened. “And your... his... *your* baby?”

Jesus, it took all my willpower to say it. The metallic taste of blood on my tongue matched the distaste of Stuart having any connection to Willow or the baby. Not because I was jealous—although, yes, I was—but mainly because the man was dangerous, and Willow’s face was a stark reminder that she would never be safe around him.

After a long silence, she finally responded with resignation.

“Obviously I can’t stop him from coming around his own child, but the baby’s safety will be my priority. My *mãe* always said that if a man hits you once, they’ll do it again. If they cheat on you once, they’ll do it again. And I trust she’s right.”

“Good.” I exhaled a long, slow breath and pushed a hand through my hair. I agreed wholeheartedly, and it was exactly that which had me questioning for years whether I was good enough for Willow. I didn’t cheat—not exactly, although my sexual preferences could be perceived as such. Degradation, praise, masochism, spanking, and sometimes even tying my partner up and whipping them.

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

Frustration and self-loathing burned beneath my skin. Right now, all I wanted was to be what Willow wanted and needed, but I was fairly certain that her finding out about my affinity for BDSM would forever change her perception of me.

And *that* I couldn’t handle. I couldn’t lose her as a friend too.

The pressure in my chest expanded while her clean, warm scent filled the car, intoxicating me while clouding my head.

I stayed silent for several blocks, weaving through parts of Lisbon, my mind running a million miles an hour. There had to be a way to help her out of this mess—a way to help ease my guilt at having brought Stuart into her life.

We were sitting at a red light when the solution hit me like a ton of bricks.



“We are getting married.” Twin flames ignited into a full-blown inferno in my chest with the words out in the open, bouncing off the Land Rover’s windows like a ping-pong ball.

Willow sat up straight, staring at me wide-eyed. With each passing second, I was certain it was the best idea of my life.

“We’re *what now?*”

My pulse beat a furious rhythm as I pulled over a block from the hotel and locked eyes with her.

“We’ll get married,” I repeated patiently. The roughness of my voice matched the intensity of my emotions. Goddammit, I needed to get a grip before I scared her away. “There’s no better way to make Stuart understand he’ll never have you. Depending on how this next hour goes with the motherfucker, he’ll live, but he won’t step foot in your baby’s life.” Although I told myself that I was doing this for her, I knew it was entirely for selfish reasons. “You don’t want me to kill Stuart, and I don’t want him thinking he can ever get close to you. I may have connections in the underworld and access to more weapons than a small army, but Stuart has connections too. He also has an ego that won’t enjoy being bruised.”

I had no desire to ever again experience the terror that gripped me when I found Willow hurt in front of my home. Even more terrifying was the possibility of me not being there.

Surprise crossed her face, and she tilted her head in what I hoped was consideration of my proposal. It wasn’t the most romantic one, but it was out in the open, and I refused to take it back.

“Royce, I’m pregnant.” She spoke slowly, as if she were speaking to a child.

“I’ll take care of you and the baby.”

“But—” Her sentence cut off with a soft gasp when I wrapped my hand around her nape, closing the distance between us.

“Marry me, Willow.” Insecurity, such a strange and unfamiliar feeling, snaked its way into my heart. “We’re best friends. We already know we get along. We can make it work.”

“That’s not exactly the way I envisioned...” She faltered, swallowing, before she added, “A proposal.”

“Fuck normal, Willow. This is you and me. I promise to protect you, honor you, and be good to you and your baby.” The roughness of my voice

startled me, but not more than the intensity of these feelings twisting inside my chest.

“But I’m broke and jobless.”

The moment the words were out of her mouth, she knew she slipped. Our gazes met and awareness flushed through her with the knowledge it was another secret she’d kept from me.

A stray strand of hair wisped around her face and I lifted my hand to tuck it behind her ear. The touch was light and reverent, and a tiny shiver racked her body. I couldn’t tell if it was a positive or negative reaction, so I focused on her face instead.

“When did you lose your job?” My voice was soft with a hint of vehemence.

“A few weeks ago.” I remained quiet, seeing the lie on her face. “A little over a month ago.”

“Why?” Chewing on her bottom lip, she was probably debating whether it was wise to lie or not. “I want the truth, Willow.”

She sighed in resignation. “Stuart showed up during one of the productions and lost his temper. My boss didn’t take it well.” She swallowed. “He wasn’t fond of physical violence.”

*No. Fucking. Shit.*

“And you hid it from me, why?”

“I don’t know.” She faltered, embarrassment coloring her cheeks. “I’d learned I was pregnant earlier that week, and it felt wrong to run to you.” Another shiver rolled down her body and I closed my eyes, drawing on my patience. “I felt like such a loser.”

Her dark lashes lowered, throwing shadows against her cheeks, and I pressed my forehead against hers for a moment before getting myself together.

“You should always run to me.” She remained quiet, her eyes glistening with emotions that gutted me. “No matter what, when, or how. You come to me. Understood?”

She nodded.

“You still want to go through with your plan with an unemployed woman?” she murmured.

“Absolutely. You’ll never have to worry about money again. Not when you’re with me. Besides, you’re brilliant. You can help me with my company.”

She let out a strangled laugh. “I know nothing about your investment strategy. I can’t help you with it, not if you want to remain a billionaire.”

I had inherited the majority of my fortune, but I also expanded it—much like my brothers—by investing in real estate, stocks, and a start-up of several successful recreational stores.

“Then be a trophy wife. Anything you want.” Restraint and emotions roughened the edge of my voice. There was no way I was letting her go. She was mine to protect.

“I’m pregnant, and the baby isn’t—”

She was trying to find reasons why we shouldn’t be together, and I wouldn’t have it.

“I’ll give you and the baby a beautiful life.” She shot me a dubious look, still unconvinced, but refusal wasn’t an option. Not anymore. “I vow on my mother’s life.”

She sighed. “I believe you, but I’m not your problem. Nor is my baby.”

“You’re under my protection, so is the baby. And just so we’re clear, you’re not my problem. You’re my solution.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Huh?”

My mind was working furiously. “You’ll be doing me a favor.”

“How’s that?”

“It will give me peace of mind to know you’re protected.” My eyes dropped to her lower abdomen. “Both of you.”

A frown creased her brow. “That’s... I’m grateful... flattered that—”

“Do it for me,” I interjected. “If you won’t do it for yourself, do it for me.” I was grasping at straws here, trying to come up with a reason to convince her why this was a good idea. “You’ve jumped in for me at the business events I attend that offer me a plus-one. If we’re married, I don’t have to worry about it.”

She snickered softly. “Yes, and I know how easy it is for you to find a date.”

“But none of them are...” I let the unspoken word hang between us. I didn’t want to scare her away, so I quickly reined in my emotions. “Those women don’t stimulate me. Plus... they’re not helping me restore my image. The tabloids have been costing me business. I can’t let the people who rely on me for their livelihoods suffer because of some bad press.” Her bottom lip disappeared between her teeth, contemplating my words. “It’ll be a win-win for both of us,” I added.

I brought my thumb around and pressed it against the base of her neck where her pulse drummed.

“So... it would be strictly platonic?” She studied me with a defiance that I’d come to know well over the years of our friendship. “Because the last thing I need right now, Royce, is to be a footnote in your book, or anyone else’s for that matter.”

“Strictly platonic,” I agreed. *For now.* Because Willow was so fucking wrong.

She could never be a footnote in any book. She was the book, a whole encyclopedia.

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## Chapter 11

### Willow



As my heart thundered in my chest, the dawn song of birds drifted through the air and the rising sun cast a rosy hue across Lisbon. The city streets started to hum with activity, and the hustle and bustle of early risers began waking the world up.

A marriage. To Royce.

It should have been a dream come true, yet something akin to disappointment settled heavy in the pit of my stomach when he agreed to my platonic demand. Warning bells rang in my ears, but my heart decidedly ignored them.

I'd do this for my baby.

Aside from my father, there was no man I trusted more than Royce. I was jobless, and unless I planned on moving in with my parents, I was homeless too because I canceled my lease in preparation for the wedding.

"Stop overthinking," Royce instructed. He exited the car as I watched him come around and open my door, then effortlessly scoop me up into his arms. He was really taking this no-walking-on-his-way-to-teach-Stuart-a-lesson thing seriously. "We'll be helping each other, and the best part is we already know we're compatible," he added, striding his way to the hotel entrance.

My heart leapt.

We got along great, but I wasn't sure that I'd be able to keep myself in check if I was around him all the time. Royce was a gorgeous specimen, but add to that mix his kind and generous character and it was going to be impossible to resist him.

“But...” *Can we have sex?* “People will know it’s fake if we’re seeing other people.”

He stilled, his steps pausing mid-stride.

“What other people?”

“You... Well... We...” I was making a major ass out of myself. I should have really thought this through. I shifted in his arms, my arms tightening around his neck before I met his gaze. “Royce, you’re a known playboy; women fling themselves at you everywhere you go. There’s no way I can expect you to stay celibate.”

He resumed walking, a small smile flickering over his mouth.

“We’ll both be celibate in this marriage.” *Ouch.* With his stubble, dark wavy hair, and even darker eyes, he looked devastatingly handsome. And hard to resist. “Unless you’d prefer being tied up and...”

The insinuation wrapped up in his tone sent heat curling low in my stomach as I imagined what it’d feel like to have him for one night. Just one night.

Curiously enough, Royce and I had never ventured into discussing our sex lives. Though, thanks to his public persona, plenty of speculation had leaked regarding his kinky interests, fueled mostly by the female population.

“What do you mean?” I asked in a husky voice, a rush of heat coloring my cheeks.

“I mean like *50 Shades of Grey*.” There was something in his voice—reverence, a soft drawl—that lit me up from the inside out. And damn if Royce as Christian Grey didn’t sound exciting. “Don’t get your panties in a twist, Willow. I’m joking.”

I scoffed.

“Fine, celibacy it is.” I tried not to sound disappointed. “Should be easy enough,” I lied, surprised that lightning didn’t strike me right then and there.

Royce entered the hotel, walking through the lobby with the confidence of a billionaire that always got his way as he carried me bridal-style. Ironical, considering today was supposed to be my wedding day.

“How can I help you, sir,” said the concierge, eyeing me warily, likely taking stock of my bandaged face and wondering if we were about to cause a scene.

Royce ignored the man and kept walking, then stopped and spoke over his shoulder in a way that brooked no argument. “The Auclair-Harris wedding won’t be happening. The almost-bride has had a change of heart. She’s decided to elope with me.”

Royce’s delicious, masculine scent flooded my lungs and sent butterflies fluttering in my stomach.

“But not the priest,” he added.

“Sir?”

“Keep the priest here and I’ll make it worth your while.” Royce’s eyes returned to me and he continued toward the elevators. “I’ll notify your parents and friends.”

It didn’t surprise me that he knew of the plan for my family’s priest, the very same man who married my own parents, to marry me off. The Harris family wasn’t very religious, but my parents had insisted that he be present and bless the union.

I couldn’t help but comment. “Elope, huh?”

A smile danced in his eyes despite his grim expression. “I guess we’ll have a busy day before disappearing.”

He didn’t elaborate, and I fixed him with a stare that demanded answers. He stepped into the empty elevator and pressed the button for the top floor. “And why do you need my parents’ priest?”

His lip twitched. “I have to confess my sins.”

The elevator doors closed and the silent ascent to my hotel room began.

“Sins or kinks?” I teased, attempting to cut through the electricity that crackled between us.

He flicked me a look full of fire. “Maybe both?”

I smiled, then immediately winced and reached up to cup my jaw. It was enough to remind us of what brought us here, and the mood sombered. Priest and everything forgotten, I tightened my grip around the nape of his neck and released a tight breath, hoping this knot in my chest would loosen.

“Just don’t kill him, Royce,” I murmured. “Stuart isn’t worth it.”

Royce’s face shifted into an unreadable mask, but his body emanated something equivalent to arctic temperatures in the dead of winter.

Foreboding slithered down my spine, warning me that Royce’s cold fury was more dangerous than anything.

“Don’t worry, baby,” he said. “I won’t be killing anyone today.”

As the elevator dinged and the door slid open, I couldn't shake the sense of impending danger.



A dust of luck had us running into a maid who opened the door to my hotel room—after Royce flashed her his irresistible smile and a stack of bills, of course.

“Don’t tell anyone you saw us.” His threat was delivered with charm and subtle tension threading his muscles.

“I won’t, sir. Not a word.”

He nodded, satisfied, and she scurried away. Once inside, we glanced around the room, which stood exactly the way it did yesterday. My wedding dress hung on the door, staring back at us mockingly. I imagined what Stuart’s room looked like, and wondered whether he’d called housekeeping to straighten up after he attacked me.

Royce set me gently on the edge of the bed, grabbed my duffle bag, then started efficiently packing all my items into it. It took him all of two minutes for the room to bear no evidence of my ever being here.

He stopped in front of the last item—my wedding dress. “Who picked it out?”

“It was my mother’s,” I murmured, rubbing my belly absentmindedly. The ache in my body throbbed, but it wasn’t unbearable now that I got the doctor’s assurance the baby was healthy and safe. “With minor adjustments to fit me.”

He nodded, pulled out his phone, then started typing furiously. Three consecutive chimes rang out, and just as I began to wonder who all he’d sent those messages to, he slid the delicate material off the hanger and unzipped it. “Okay, let’s put it on.”

My brows pulled together. “Why? I’m not getting married today.”

When he faced me, his smile was all lazy charm, and I could finally see the Royce countless women had experienced before me. Dangerous seduction. “You’re marrying me, or did you forget already?”

“Today? Is that what you meant before, with the priest?” I gaped in disbelief. My eyes flicked to the mirror above the chest of drawers. “Look at me, I’m a battered, bruised, rotten apple.”



He came to stand in front of me and lowered down to one knee, his hands wrapping around my waist with a softness I wouldn't think he was capable of if I didn't know him almost better than I knew myself.

"You look beautiful, and no amount of cuts or bruises could ever hide it." The reverence evident in his voice caused emotions to pool in my chest. Damn hormones. I was getting drunk off his delicious scent, willingly falling into the comfort of his words. "We'll get married, you'll be an Ashford, and nobody will ever touch you again."

"Okay," I breathed, a sense of relief washing over me as his words provided the reassurance I didn't know I needed.

"Can I help you get dressed?"

"You're technically not supposed to see me in it, you know," I remarked softly. "It's bad luck."

"We'll make our own rules, baby."

Laughter danced in his eyes as he pecked my cheek, then rose to his full height. My chest rose and fell as I watched his strong fingers undress me expertly, then help me slip into my mother's dress. As he reached for the buttons, I swore his fingers shook, and I flicked him a curious look. Maybe he was having second thoughts.

"Royce," I whispered, and his eyes met mine. "Are you sure? I don't want you to regret this."

With the last satin button in place, he took a step back and leaned against the wall. Every ounce of his attention was on me, setting a full-blown inferno inside me. When he looked at me like that, I could almost feel his caress on my sensitive skin.

He still wore his leather jacket, the contrast between us so evident. Yet somehow, we fit.

"I've never been more sure of anything else in my life," was his answer, and a sigh of relief left me. Looked like I was getting married today after all.

I stood up slowly and made my way to the mirror, sucking in a sharp breath. The white silk hugged my curves, draping to the floor in graceful lines, and a tasteful V-neck gave room to the imagination. I turned and twisted my head around, giving my back—the only altered piece—a glance. The open back draped down almost to my tailbone, and the exposure gave the dress a sexy appeal.

“I...” Clearing my throat, I tried again. “It’s my first time trying it on.” What I didn’t say was that every time I’d gone to try it on in the last two weeks, my chest and throat would break out into hives. Yet another sign I ignored. Royce straightened, and when our eyes connected, I saw so much affection in his eyes that I felt my breath catch. “I should put some makeup on.”

“If you want,” he said. “Although you’re perfect just the way you are.” Gosh, how was a woman supposed to resist a man like that? Before I could come up with something to say in response, Royce’s gaze flicked to the adjoining door. “Is his room through there?”

I nodded hesitantly, and before I could even blink, he was stalking across the suite. “This won’t take long.”

Then he kicked the door so hard it flew off the hinges—which was saying a lot because I knew for a fact the doors in this hotel were ironclad and basically bulletproof. A high-pitched scream came from the room, and against my better judgment, my feet carried me to the door. I supposed I shouldn’t have been surprised to find Stuart being ridden like a fucking camel.

A woman wearing nothing but a white apron sat on top of a spread-eagle Stuart, bucking wildly and making exaggerated moaning sounds.

“Get lost,” Royce barked at the maid, not even sparing her a glance. His dark and furious gaze was narrowed on Stuart as he closed the distance to the bed and backhanded him so hard his head flew sideways. “Say a word to anyone and I’ll find you.”

The sheer terror on her face vouched that she wouldn’t, and I almost felt sorry for her. Royce could be scary when he wanted to be.

“What the fuck, Royce?”

“What did I tell you when you first started dating her?” he bellowed, this time punching directly in the nose. Stuart whimpered, blood dripping down his face. “What did I fucking say, Stuart?”

I stood frozen, noting in the corner of my mind that the maid had bolted out of the room.

“She’s not yours,” Stuart spat, finding his courage and clearly having a death wish. Royce pulled out a gun and pistol-whipped him before pushing it against his temple. Unfortunately, it didn’t knock Stuart out, and he continued blabbing. “You’re just pissed off because I knocked her up before you could stick your dick inside her.”

The barrel of Royce's gun pressed deeper into the side of his head, his finger braced on the trigger. My blood drummed so loud in my ears that I couldn't hear my own thoughts.

"Royce—" I finally found my voice. His gaze coasted to me while nausea churned in my stomach. "R-rememb—remember what you said."

"Wait for me in your room." His calm, cool voice pierced my heart and fear rolled down my spine.

"Please don't kill him." His jaw clenched. I couldn't let Royce pay for my foolish choices. If he pulled that trigger, he'd end up in prison. The cameras would have picked us up in the elevator, and that was before we ran into the concierge or the maid who just ran for her life. I was surprised the police hadn't been sent up yet. So, no. Not even Royce's last name could save him. "He's not worth it," I said, urging him to remember our earlier conversation.

He nodded and put the gun away, and I sighed, nearly sick with relief.

"Willow, you don't need to see this," Royce said, keeping his gaze on Stuart and shaking his head. Stuart followed our exchange, his erection still sticking straight up to the ceiling. The sight would be comical under any other circumstance. "For the love of God, woman, wait for me in the other room."

A shiver ran down my spine, but I resisted the urge to hide in the room and let Royce handle it all. If he killed Stuart, I'd be an accomplice, for better or for worse.

"I'm staying," I breathed, my heart trying to flee from my chest. In all the years that I'd known Royce, I'd never seen him angry like this. "I can't let you kill him."

Royce's muscled forearm flexed as he reined in his temper, but I knew better than to take it as a good sign. The sight of Stuart in this bed made him blind with fury.

"I'm not going to kill him, but I did warn him what would happen if he hurt you." The playfulness I was used to seeing from him disappeared, leaving him shrouded in darkness. "Didn't I, Stuart?"

I blinked. Royce had threatened him before?

## Chapter 12

### Royce



Stuart's courage slowly deflated under the weight of my stare.

My expression didn't match the savagery rising within me. How fucking dare he hurt her? My best friend. My woman. Frustration flared, twisting and heating in my gut, burning with the need to keep her safe.

But the fucker wasn't in enough pain for this conversation, so I pulled a knife from my pocket and pressed it against his jugular.

"Do you know if I slice you here, the blood flowing to and from your brain will just—" I made the sound of an explosion with my mouth and flicked my fingers for the added visual effect. Finally, fear entered Stuart's eyes, and I leaned forward. "You made your last mistake when it comes to Willow."

I pressed the blade against his neck, slicing the skin, and his eyes bulged with panic.

"It was one time," he wheezed as gasps left his throat. "I won't do it again."

My grip on the blade tightened. "That's right, you won't." I pushed the knife deeper, and he started crying. Fuck, and I'd barely gotten started. "Because she's mine now."

He let out a pained sob.

"You c-can't take her." His whimpery stutter grated on my nerves. "She's pregnant with my kid, and I have rights."

In a flash, I shifted, plunging my blade into the palm of his hand. A howl ripped from his lips, bouncing against the walls.

“Want to repeat that?” I twisted the blade in his flesh, drawing inhuman cries from him. For the first time ever, I was grateful for the Harris family’s obsession with image. They’d booked the most expensive hotel in Lisbon for their precious son’s wedding, and this building had all the makings of a fortress. Thick stone walls, high ceilings, and plush carpet—all the better to soundproof this motherfucker’s screams. “Maybe we should try the other palm too. After all, I made a mistake and stabbed your left hand. But you’re right-handed, aren’t you, Stuart?”

I let my thirst for dishing pain and revenge rise within me. My darkness rarely took over, but when it did, it was game over for anyone who stood in my path.

I pulled the knife out, and before I could follow through with my threat, he screamed out. “*Please*, Royce. I blacked out when she threatened to cancel the wedding.” He let out a pained sob. “I didn’t know what I was doing. I blacked out. You have to believe me.”

“Royce,” she whispered, her voice featherlight, but my rage got the best of me. I was too far gone.

I grabbed his chin roughly and twisted his neck like a pretzel. He was lucky I didn’t snap it. It would be so fucking easy.

“Look what you’ve done,” I gritted, barely keeping a lid on my temper. Willow stood at the doorway, watching the entire encounter pale white with trembling fingers smoothing her dress over and over again. It was almost as if she needed to soothe herself. I should shield her from this side of me, but right now, I was too far gone. “Tell me what you see.”

Wheezing gasps gurgled in his throat and his eyes bulged with pain as I squeezed his chin, hoping to break his jaw.

“Sh-she is all messed up.”

My molars clenched and my hand slid to his neck.

“She’s fucking beautiful, and you’re messed up in your head.” He fought against me, but it was in vain. “But I’ll show you messed up.” With precision, I sliced his left testicle. Not deep enough for him to bleed out, but enough for him to likely lose all feeling in it—for good. His pained howl vibrated against the walls as he bucked like a wild horse. I wanted to stretch his torture out for hours, days, but I had a priest to coerce and a wedding to get to. “Now, apologize.”

Stuart’s eyes flicked to Willow who still stood at the doorway, ghost white now, but still looking drop-dead gorgeous in her wedding dress. I

punched him in the face, but I knew I had to bring this to an end. I promised Willow I wouldn't kill him and I'd keep that promise if it killed me.

"Don't fucking look at her or I'll dig the eyeballs out of your skull." To emphasize my words, I landed another punch, and the sound of cracking bones filled the space. "Apologize."

He turned his head, staring at me with swollen, beady eyes. He opened his mouth several times like a gaping fish before finding his voice through his pain. "I'm... I'm sorry, Willow."

"You can do better than that." I patted his cheek. "You hit a woman. A *pregnant* woman. My woman. Do it right, or I'm going to take my lessons to another level."

Another pained sob tore from his bloodied lips. "I'm so sorry for hitting you and threatening you. I'm a loser scumbag and should have never touched you. It'll never happen again."

That would have to do.

"Go near her again and I'll kill you," I warned, eerily calm. "And, as you know, I don't make empty promises."

Stuart looked past me with fear, his gaze locking on Willow, and I didn't like it one bit. Every instinct in me screamed to kill him. But because I made a promise, I settled on punching him a final time, breaking his nose and sending his head flying to the side, away from Willow.

Leaving him, I stood up and strode back to her room.

"Ready?"

She nodded from beneath a canvas of cuts and bruises.

I grabbed her duffle bag and extended my hand. She took it without hesitation, her soft fingers interlocking with mine as we left Stuart crying in the room behind us.

## Chapter 13

### Willow



**A**s Royce and I made our way out toward the elevators, I couldn't help but think back to the first time he came to my rescue. Except, I wasn't a naive young girl anymore, and he shouldn't have to save me.

But he did. As always, he'd had my back. He would never let anything happen to me. *To us*, I thought, placing a hand on my abdomen.

He turned to face me, and I arched my brow in question. "Is everything okay?"

Thick tension rolled off him, sucking all the air out of the elevator. His fists clenched and unclenched around the straps of my bag.

"I should be asking you that." His chiseled face was so beautiful, and I feared I was too far gone. There was nothing platonic about my feelings for him. Maybe it was just a reaction to his fierce protectiveness. Or the way he always came through for me. "Did I scare you?"

I frowned at the odd question. How could he even think that? If my body wasn't battered and in such pain, I would have tried to jump his bones. Royce's eyes darkened like he could read my mind.

"No," I finally answered. "Nothing about you scares me."

Without a warning, he dropped the duffle bag and scooped me up into his arms.

"What—"

"You shouldn't be on your feet—the doctor recommended as little strain as possible. I shouldn't even have agreed to let you come," he scolded. I shushed him and leaned into his chest. It was only nine in the morning, but

the exhaustion in my bones signaled bedtime rather than a new day. “I sent a message to your parents.”

“What did you tell them?” I asked with uncertainty. I hadn’t told my parents about my pregnancy or my issues with Stuart. Although we were close, their Catholic beliefs often made our perspective on life different—being single and pregnant, for example.

“That you made me the happiest man on this planet by agreeing to marry me, not Stuart.”

My brows furrowed. “And what did they say?”

He flashed me that smirk that had women falling all over themselves for him. “No idea. I was a tad busy. But I’m sure they’ll show up at our wedding. They pulled me aside at the party yesterday and tasked me with finding out what was going on with you. They’re worried. They love you, Willow.”

I was still vague on the details, but his words put me at ease. Knowing Royce, he had a plan, and I’d go along with it because there was nowhere else I’d rather be than under his protection.

“Just so we’re clear...” A headache throbbed behind my temple, but I refused to let it ruin today. “I’m walking down the aisle when I marry you. Sham of a marriage or not.”

A ghost of a smile passed his expression just as the door slid open, and he picked the duffle bag up effortlessly without letting me go, then stepped out into the lobby. The sun poured in from the windows and the space buzzed with life.

“It’s a deal, baby.”

Something grabbed my heart, and for the first time in weeks—months—it felt lighter.



“Why did you bribe the priest and then force him to come along?” I muttered under my breath as the bustle of Lisbon’s morning traffic converged into white noise in my mind. “What if he curses us or something?”

My pulse beat in my throat as Royce drove toward the same church my parents got married in. São Miguel, a Catholic church in the Alfama district



of Lisbon, was one of the oldest parishes, famous for its gilded interior. It was my mother's ancestors' church.

Royce flicked a glance over his shoulder at the glaring priest in the back seat as he zigzagged through traffic. "He won't. Right, Father Miguel?"

Father Miguel was in the lobby when we exited the elevators. Royce being Royce attempted to bribe Father Miguel, but little did he know the man was the epitome of morals and scruples. The clerical suit and white collar seemed obvious to me, but what did I know?

Needless to say, the man promptly admonished Royce in Portuguese, then proceeded to shove the bills back in his hands. He then attempted to yank me from Royce's muscled arms, shouting about violence and the sanctity of marriage and other such hysterics. In the commotion of the three of us speaking at the same time—me insisting it wasn't Royce who'd marked my face, Royce apologizing for the bribery, and Father threatening to call the police—we drew the entire lobby's attention.

I insisted Royce put me down so I could talk to Father Miguel in peace. He obliged, but then seemed to make a split-second decision and proceeded to throw Father Miguel over his shoulder and bolt out of the lobby and into our vehicle.

"Kidnapping is a sin," was Father's response. "And hitting a woman is a sin too."

"Father, it wasn't Royce," I jumped in to defend him, taking Royce's hand in mine. "He saved me." The priest's pitying eyes narrowed on me like I was delusional, and I couldn't help letting out an exasperated breath. "I promise. It was Stuart, the man who insisted we get married at the hotel and not in the church." Then, because I was sure I was going to hell anyhow, I added, "Stuart is a nonbeliever, but not Royce. He's a Catholic. It's what it took to finally see that we belonged together—our common faith."

Royce choked, stifling a laugh, and I shot him a glare, silencing him. In Father Miguel's eyes, it was enough, because he seemed to warm to the idea a little.

"Is that true, young man?" I shifted around to face Father in the back seat, about to answer him when Father Miguel held his palm up. "I want to hear from the groom-to-be."

"It is." Royce's serious expression revealed nothing. "My mother was a devout Catholic and taught me to follow the word of gospel." I blinked,

trying hard not to show my shock. We were on a fast train to hell. “Willow is pregnant, and our child will not be born out of wedlock.”

*Oh, shit.*

Father Miguel flicked me a disapproving look that told me I’d be burning in the eternal fires of hell unless he blessed this union.

“You had extramarital relations, child?” I flashed him a guilty look. “Do your parents know?”

“No,” I croaked.

He shook his head, watching us like we were two fallen angels and only he could resurrect us back into respectful status.

“I will bless your union.” I sighed a relieved breath. “But only for the unborn child’s sake.”

“Thank you, Father,” Royce answered, a hint of laughter threading through his voice and dancing in his dark eyes.

Fatigue slowly crept through my body, aches intensifying by the minute. It had been a long day, and noon hadn’t even come around yet. I rubbed my belly gently, warmth spreading through me with the thoughts of a little miracle growing inside me. I couldn’t wait to feel the movements, hold her or him in my arms, a fierce protectiveness blooming inside me.

Five minutes later, we walked up the steps leading us to the church. The Lisbon sun shone bright in the cloudless sky, promising a dreamy future. Still, nervousness and a cold sweat encased my body. Royce’s presence and his hand on the small of my back, his thumb brushing against my bare skin, became a comfort I would be lost without. With each step, the light scent of his cologne consumed me in familiarity, and every inhale drew more of him into my lungs. My feet faltered when we reached the top step and I saw who was waiting for us.

My best friends, Aurora and Sailor, stood with their husbands, dressed to the nines. And there, just past them, stood my wonderful parents, smiling at me fondly. Not a hint of apprehension in their eyes. Like they knew this was where I should be, and with who.

“Finally!” Sailor exclaimed, running over to me with Aurora in tow. It wasn’t until they were a few feet away that their steps froze, and I remembered I’d forgotten to hide my bruises with concealer.

“That fucker,” Aurora hissed, clenching her fist while her shadow—her husband, Alexei—came to stand behind her, a cold expression on his face. If it was aimed at me, I’d probably pee my pants, but thankfully, I knew it

wasn't. Alexei Nikolaev was one of the good ones walking this earth, despite his mafia connections.

"I knew he wasn't right for you, but never could I have imagined he would do *this*." Mãe's voice filtered through, breaking Sailor out of her stupor. "*Aquele filho da puta*."

"Mrs. Auclair!" Father Miguel stared at my mãe in astonishment, clearly not used to hearing her curse—though, I imagined if he knew the reason behind my bruises, he'd be calling Stuart a son of a bitch too.

My father, on the other hand, cursed like a sailor. "*Je vais tuer cette pièce de merde*." Thankfully, the priest didn't understand French and would hopefully never know about the threat my father just leveled against Stuart "the piece of shit."

Their hands wrapped around me and my throat tightened. Pregnancy had made me emotional, but this time, I was certain the past twenty-four hours were to blame.

"Raphael, I think we should kill him," Sailor said to her husband, who was the head of the Colombian mafia.

"No, you'll leave the killing to me," my father retorted decisively, the seriousness of his tone concerning. "You have more years left on this earth than me."

"Stop talking nonsense, Mr. Auclair," my mother scolded him. She always called him that when she didn't like what he was saying. "Nobody is killing anyone. This is our daughter's day, let's not ruin it with nonsense."

I buried my face in my father's chest, the familiar scent bringing forward so many comforting memories of my childhood.

"I'm sorry," I murmured. "I should have never let it go this far." I was talking about the preparations for the wedding, how I'd ignored the signs of Stuart's violence, and my lack of feelings for him.

My mother's hand brushed against my curls, pushing them behind my ear, while my father kissed my forehead.

"Don't you worry about any of it," my father assured. "We had a feeling something was wrong. We should have insisted you tell us." He cupped my cheeks gently with his aged hands. "Is this what you want?"

"We love Royce," Mãe added softly, beaming like a ray of sunshine. "And admittedly, I've always hoped you two would find a way to each other." Her eyes flicked over my head, and I followed the trail. Royce stood to the side, giving my parents and me some privacy while my best friends

badgered him. “When he sent that message, I was thrilled, but it’s a bit rushed. No?”

I tore my gaze away from Royce’s coal-eyed stare and found my parents’ attentive eyes on me, probably seeing more than I’d ever be able to say.

“Yes, I’m sure.” The conviction they saw on my face must have assured them. “Now, how bad do I look?”

“You’re beautiful,” my father said. “Although, when I get my hands on him, Stuart won’t be able to say the same for himself.”

I smiled. “Royce already took care of him.”

And just like that, Royce had my parents under an even deeper spell.

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## Chapter 14

### Royce



“So, you and Willow, huh?” I nodded. “Fair warning, big brother. If you hurt her, I’m gonna kick your ass.” My sister’s playful warning coaxed a smile from me. “And then I’ll hug you to death.”

“Ditto,” Sailor chimed in.

“Except there won’t be any hugging from my wife,” Raphael warned, a wry note entering his voice. “Or I’ll be doing the ass kicking.”

I hid a smile at his not-so-subtle threat. “You can try, Colombian, but you’ll fail.”

Everyone knew Raphael’s possessiveness of Sailor ran deep, and I was more than happy to keep ten feet away from her. Besides, she was like a sister to me and she’d forever remain that way. Willow, on the other hand, snuck her way into my heart with that kiss ten years ago. I’d never be able to untangle the intricate hold she had over me—nor would I want to.

Mr. Auclair left the women and made his way to me. “Royce.” He extended his hand and I took it into my grip. “You’ll forever have my gratitude.”

I tilted my head. “No pun intended, but I’d rather have your blessing.”

A knowing gleam entered his eyes as he smoothed a hand over his tie. “You have it, especially after hearing my daughter confirm that she wants to marry you.”

*She wants to marry me.*

Like some cheesy musical, the words played on repeat in my mind. Willow’s eyes, currently more green than blue, found mine. She graced me

with a smile, and something about it eased the restless energy churning in my chest.

I couldn't wait to slide a ring on her finger and make her my wife.

"I brought you a tux. It's hanging in the rectory," Aurora said smoothly, mischief lightening her eyes. "I know you can't keep away from Willow, but you can't marry her in a leather jacket and jeans."

I was seriously contemplating it. I didn't want to be away from Willow for even a moment.

"Come on, I'm your best man and..." I tuned Alexei out, my eyes locked on my bride. I wanted to bark orders at the priest to marry us right now, under the sun where her auburn hair glimmered.

"Father Miguel." I turned to the priest who seemed unsure of what to do, his bushy brows bent. Fuck, I hoped he didn't forget how to lead a wedding ceremony. He could skip through all of it, if he wished, as long as we got to the "I dos" so that Willow was mine forever. "Can you just marry us here?"

His face crinkled in disapproval. "Why?"

I nodded toward Willow. "Because she looks stunning like this." The roughness of my voice must have carried because I felt everyone's heavy stares on me.

"You're really not going to change?" Aurora asked, her eyes flitting to Sailor. "This is bullshit," she muttered, then drifted over to her friends, leaving the men on one side of the courtyard in front of the church while the women congregated, fussing over each other's hair and makeup.

I just wanted to make this official and then take her away from here. Our honeymoon was on the horizon and I couldn't wait to get her alone.

"I promise you, son, Willow won't run off." It was impossible to miss the smile in Mr. Auclair's voice. He rubbed a hand over his jaw, his tone serious again. "Although, I must say, I understand the feeling."

"At least give your woman a choice," Raphael suggested.

As if she sensed we were talking about her, Willow raised her head. I had no words to describe how beautiful she looked in her dress. If I had my way, I'd tear it off her with my teeth and then do every filthy, debauched thing I could think of. Anything to leave a permanent flush on her cheeks.

She coaxed a lie out of me this morning. *Platonic*.

There was nothing platonic about what I wanted to do to her.

Willow slowly made her way over, her bruises a sore reminder that I hadn't ended the prick responsible for them. Right or wrong, if Willow hadn't been in the room, I would have ended Stuart, then made his body disappear.

As it was, I gave her my word—even though I kept my promise vague.

I wasn't finished with him yet. Not by a long shot.

"Change your mind?" Willow teased as she stopped two feet from me, tilting her head back to hold my gaze. If only she knew this was the easiest decision I could ever make.

"Never." I took her hand in mind. "How do you feel about the priest marrying us here, out in the sun? I know you wanted to walk down the aisle, but you're breathtaking like this."

A subtle blush crawled up her skin until it stained her cheeks. She angled her head, then curved her lips into a smile. "I like that. It's more... us."

"Jesus, at least tell him to change," Aurora muttered.

This time Willow shook her head, her eyes shimmering like emeralds. "No, I prefer him in leather."

"Why does that sound so naughty?" Sailor snickered, her eyes dancing with mischief. All three girls shared a glance and then burst into a fit of giggles.

"I don't think I want to know," Mrs. Auclair murmured.

"I think we're too old to understand anyway, *mon amour*." Her husband hooked his hand around her shoulder and drew her closer. The love between them was so tangible, it vibrated in the space between them with invisible strings, tying them into a unit.

It was exactly what I wanted with Willow, the word "palpable" encapsulating my emotions when I was around her. The question was whether I'd ultimately scare her away.

"Very well," the priest announced in heavily accented English. "I guess we'll get started. Everyone, find your places." He lifted his eyes to the sky as if asking forgiveness. "Bride and groom, you may stand in front of me."

The rhythm of my heart matched the seconds of the ceremony from start to finish, beat by rapid beat. All I saw was Willow, standing in front of me like my own personal salvation. All I heard was her shallow breaths; all I could smell was her intoxicating scent.

A cleared throat pulled my attention to the priest, an agitated glare crossing his features. “Well, son, do you?”

“I do.” Two simple words, and they burned through me with the strength of an inferno that I knew wouldn’t cease until my ashes dusted this earth.

It was Willow’s turn, and her soft “I do” had my heart soaring.

We exchanged the rings Willow’s parents provided—since I certainly hadn’t thought that far ahead what with this wedding coming together in less than five hours. We promised to love, cherish, and protect each other, forsaking all others, and I intended to honor that vow forever.

Another heartbeat, a kiss on the lips that *certainly* did not feel platonic, and she was mine.

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## Chapter 15

### Willow



I was Mrs. Royce Ashford.

The brighter the sun shone, the lighter my heart felt. The day started with bruises and a harsh reality check, and ended with a kiss full of promises.

“My little girl is all grown up.” My mother’s damp cheeks and glistening eyes found me, and her five-foot-nothing frame pulled me and Royce into a hug. “Now you’re ours forever. Welcome to the family, Royce.”

“Thank you, Mrs.—”

“You can call me by my first name, or *Mãe*. No more Mrs. Auclair.”

“As you wish, *Mãe*.”

My mother lit up like a hundred-watt bulb, and I couldn’t resist a nervous chuckle. She seemed so happy, so proud, and I worried how she would feel if she knew this arrangement was born purely out of convenience.

Royce stepped in front of me, draped in jeans and leather, and my gaze lifted to his. The dread of the past few weeks faded into the vision of a hopeful future, one filled with peace if not intimacy. We stood in the large courtyard in front of the church while nerves ran through me, but nothing had ever felt as right as this moment.

When I was crushing on him in my high school years, I always imagined myself with a big family and Royce by my side. I never really thought it would end—or start—like this. Yet, it felt right. My baby and I would be safe and loved by Royce. It might not be a marriage like my

parents', but it would be a good marriage. Royce and I got along, and I'd seen firsthand how protective he was of Aurora when we were kids. He'd be a good father—stepfather—to my baby.

"What if you regret this come tomorrow?"

He slipped his hands into mine, entwining our fingers while his gaze ignited with a spark of humor. "Then I'll have to ensure tomorrow never comes."

I bit my cheek to hold in a smile and gave my head a small shake.

"You're crazy."

He let out a laugh. "Yeah, crazy about you."

My entire body froze. Euphoria kicked my heart palpitations into overdrive, right along with the butterflies that fluttered wildly in the pit of my belly.

"Platonic?" I breathed my confusion, my voice barely audible. His heavy gaze met mine, and it grew more intense.

He stared at me, and with all humor gone from his words, he said, "It's overrated." With those two words, he all but dismissed our loose agreement.

I fidgeted with my ring, my mind racing at what it could mean. "It is," I heard myself say over the gentle breeze, his *crazy about you* comment ringing in my ears.

Royce's gaze flickered with amusement. "Your mom wants us all at her place, and then you and I will disappear for a bit. Go off-grid."

I swallowed, pulling my bottom lip between my teeth. The blissful thought of getting away with him warred with the foreboding creeping through my gut—the fear that Stuart would eventually have a claim on my child.



"How are you feeling?" Aurora asked, watching me with a keen eye over her champagne glass.

"Fine." I flashed an awkward smile as I took a sip of my sparkling water.

We were back at my parents' place for the wedding reception they'd thrown together. It was impressive what my mother managed to do in such a short time, and although it wasn't anything fancy, it was tasteful and

elegant. Stuart's family had been in charge of my intended wedding reception, and standing here now, surrounded by people who wanted the best for me, I couldn't be more pleased with the way things had played out.

The house smelled like wintergreen, citrus, and homemade baked goods. Aurora, Sailor, and I sat in the den overlooking the old city street that brimmed with tourists.

"Why didn't you tell us about Stuart?" Sailor breathed, reaching out to brush my hair behind my ear. I wasn't surprised they were bombarding me with questions. They'd insisted on covering up my bruises before taking pictures earlier, and I could almost *smell* the iron in the air from how hard they were biting their tongues.

Aurora blew out a sigh. "We could have helped you."

I absentmindedly rubbed a hand over my belly while a knot of emotion formed in my throat. I'd struck gold when life threw Aurora and Sailor in my path. They were family, and we'd seen each other through the highest of highs and lowest of lows.

"I'm sorry. It just felt like it was a problem I needed to deal with on my own, and for some reason, I ignored the signs until yesterday when I sat him down and told him I couldn't go through with the wedding."

"Is that when he..." Sailor trailed off, her eyes locked on my bruises.

"Yes."

"You could have come to Alexei and me. We would have helped you. You're my best friend."

"You've been our rock all these years," Sailor said dryly. "The least we could've done is help you."

Despite the unflappable demeanor Sailor usually portrayed, she had been to hell and back—witnessing her sister's abuse, raising her nephew, and getting caught up in cartel business. The last thing she needed was my petty drama.

"I didn't think it'd turn out this way," I admitted.

"Come on," Sailor scolded. "If we've learned one thing through Anya, it's to trust our instincts. Especially if the person you're supposed to trust is manipulating you to think you're helpless. Stuart obviously knew exactly what he was doing if you ignored your gut."

She was right. We witnessed Anya's abuse firsthand, and it took her tragic death for her to find peace. I still remembered it as if it was yesterday.

*The hospital floor of the maternity ward smelled of bleach and... death. I could feel its cold fingers on my nape and I had to shake off the insidious feeling in the pit of my stomach.*

*Maybe it had more to do with Royce's rejection than with this hospital. None of that even mattered anymore though—not with what I was about to face.*

*"May I help you?" A young doctor with the clearest blue eyes and most vibrant red hair I'd ever seen had stopped in front of us. She looked at us carefully—Royce on one side of me, Aurora and Byron on the other. "This is the maternity ward, and none of you look ready to have a baby."*

*Royce was quick to flash his smile, and jealousy sank its teeth into me, but I quickly shoved the ugly feeling away. "We're visiting a friend."*

*"Dr. Sophie, good evening," Byron said, cutting Royce off with an eye roll.*

*Royce's brows furrowed as he asked, "Who do you not know, Byron?"*

*"Her name tag," he murmured with a glare. Byron was clearly annoyed, and I liked him just a tad bit more because of it. "And she's Kristoff's cousin." Royce opened his mouth but then must have decided against whatever he was going to say. "We're here to visit baby McHale, Doctor," Byron added.*

*Aurora and I nodded our heads. "Anya and Sailor McHale."*

*A feeling that looked like pity passed her expression, but she quickly recovered.*

*"Are you family?"*

*"Yes."*

*"No."*

*"Maybe."*

*Three different answers bombarded the doctor, and she sighed. "I'll go with your first answer. For your friends' sake." A bad omen danced in the air, and I held my breath. "The mother has passed." Shock struck and gasps echoed. "Her sister is with the baby, but she's pretty shook up. She'll need all your support to get through this."*

*"How?" I croaked.*

*"How could this happen?" Aurora added, her voice cracking just like my heart. I took her hand, squeezing it to comfort us both.*

*"We'll explain everything shortly, but the mother had underlying health problems and—" I couldn't process anything else, my concern for my best*

*friend and her baby nephew taking center stage.*

*“Can we go...” The lump in my throat grew, and I cleared my throat to force the words out. “Can we see them, please?”*

*“Follow me, McHale family.”*

*We didn’t correct her as we trailed behind her in shock. I was trying to reconcile the image I’d had of this special day with what we were about to find at the end of this sterile hallway. Anya’s room should’ve been overflowing with cheer and happiness, not death. Sailor sat on the couch with a tiny baby cradled in her arms.*

*We pushed through room 38D and rushed over to Sailor’s side, wrapping her and her nephew into our arms.*

*“I can’t go back home.” Sailor’s voice shook, her expression full of anguish. “I—I promised.”*

*She promised her sister she’d take care of the baby, but not under the roof of the very same man who abused her.*

*Royce came over and cradled the baby’s head ever so gently with his big hand. My own heart cracked, and I was filled with love for him.*

*“Don’t worry, blondie.” It was what he always called Sailor thanks to her platinum-blond hair. “Byron can move mountains. We got this. You don’t have to go home.”*

*And he stood by that promise. From that day on, Royce and his brothers had her back. Hers and baby Gabriel’s.*

*I sighed as the memory washed over me. The truth was, maybe it was exactly that reason Royce’s address came to mind in that taxi last night.*

*“Royce to the rescue once again,” Sailor stated matter-of-factly, as though she’d been right there with me in that memory, but the softness in her eyes didn’t escape me. She’d kill for us, just as we would for her.*

*“Are you sure you don’t need anything else?” Aurora asked.*

*I nodded.*

*“I’ve got this under control. Royce and I...” Have struck a deal. “We got this.”*

*“How come you never said anything about Royce?” Sailor questioned, then threw a quick glance over her shoulder before continuing. “I’m not mad or anything, I just didn’t think we kept secrets from each other.”*

*Ever since high school, we’d been thick as thieves, but many things had changed since then. Aurora married a Russian mobster, Sailor found herself a Colombian one, so like it or not, secrets were part of their world.*

“I didn’t keep too many,” I said, staring at my water.

“Aside from losing your job,” Sailor pointed out.

I frowned. “How did you know?”

She shrugged. “Raphael.”

I frowned. “Why is he keeping tabs on me?”

She waved her hand. “He keeps tabs on everyone close to us. It comes with the territory.”

“Tell him to stop.” I glanced over to where the men stood around, drinking whiskey.

Aurora scoffed.

“I think that ship has sailed. Do you know these men at all? And don’t think for a second Royce is any different.”

I opened my mouth to argue but then closed it. She was right. Every single one of Aurora’s brothers was overbearing and overprotective. I knew my friends’ husbands were no different.

“So how about a toast?” Sailor suggested, sliding a fresh glass of champagne to me and Aurora. I eyed it debating whether I should pretend to sip on it or not even bother. I decided for the latter.

“Since when do you turn champagne down?” Aurora challenged, causing me to flush crimson under her attention.

Sailor shot to her feet. “Hold on, I know what you want.”

She bolted toward the bar my parents set up while Aurora leaned forward, her eyes locked on me.

“You’re knocked up.” Her gaze fell to my abdomen, almost as if she was wearing X-ray glasses and could see through me. “Aren’t you, Willow?”

On the way over from the church, Royce and I agreed we’d keep the pregnancy a secret for a while longer, and though it made sense, it was so damn hard. If there was one thing I knew for certain, it was that my friends didn’t judge me. In this case, I was my own worst enemy.

“Don’t say anything.” The past twenty-four hours had been a whirlwind, but I didn’t want to start my new life on lies. “It’s just that...” I faltered.

“What?” Sailor returned, glancing between us, clearly picking up on the tension in the air. “What’s going on?”

Aurora sighed. “It’s Willow’s story to tell, so I won’t push.” She leaned back in her seat, taking another sip of champagne. “Although, if it’s true, it

would be great timing considering Sailor is knocked up and Alexei and I are trying for another baby.”

“What?” Sailor’s squeal nearly pierced my ears.

I shot Aurora a disapproving look.

“That wasn’t subtle at all,” I remarked wryly.

She grinned unapologetically, shrugging her shoulders. “Just saying...”

Sailor popped one of my *mãe*’s homemade cookies into her mouth and moaned. “God, these are almost as good as sex.”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s sad.”

“Oh, don’t worry, sex with Raphael is excellent. He’s insatiable—which is why I need to replenish my energy.” She grinned around a mouthful of cookie.

Aurora sighed. “It would be so nice if the three of us could have babies around the same time. I’d love for our kids to grow up together.”

Guilt niggled at me as I traced patterns on the table. Would she feel the same if she knew that the baby wasn’t Royce’s? My skin heated. I really messed this up. The worst part was that I had no fucking idea how. I always used protection.

I met my best friends’ attentive gazes. It was almost as if they knew I was keeping a secret.

“I have something to tell you both,” I grumbled. “But you cannot tell my parents. Not yet anyhow.”

This was humiliating. I felt like I’d done everything wrong.

As if one unit, Aurora and Sailor leaned in.

“The baby is Stuart’s.” There. I blurted it out and there was no retracting it. No more lying.

They stared at me blankly, and I waited for their questions to come pouring in. It didn’t take long.

“Are you kidding me?” Aurora hissed. “You were sleeping with both Stuart and Royce, and now you’re pretending the baby is my brother’s?”

I stiffened, my anger flaring instantly and burning my cheeks.

“What the fuck do you take me for?” I snapped, offended that she’d think so little of me. “The only thing I’ve done with Royce is kiss him once, ten years ago. And today, if you count the wedding ceremony.”

When spoken out loud, it sounded stupid. Reckless. A recipe for divorce.

“You guys got married and haven’t even tested the sex?” Sailor echoed my own worries. “What if you have zero chemistry?”

“Impossible,” I muttered under my breath. There was enough chemistry between us to light up a metropolitan city.

The heat from their concerned gazes touched my skin, but I refused to let their doubt take hold of me. I trusted Royce with my life, more than any other man on this planet.

“Royce never did things the normal way.” Aurora sighed, obviously exasperated and trying to wrap her head around my revelation. “So are you telling me Royce knows you’re pregnant? If you haven’t had sex... which, by the way, ew... he’ll figure out that the baby isn’t his.”

I blushed.

“He knows.” This whole conversation was pointless, and I started to regret not sticking to the plan Royce and I had devised. “I don’t know why he insisted we get married. But I trust him, and the idea seemed right at the time... It’s been a long day, you guys.” I rubbed at the spot on my ribs that Stuart kicked, wincing slightly.

“But surely you regret not testing his bedroom skills first?” Sailor whisper-shrieked. “All I’m saying is,” she went on as Aurora wrinkled her button nose, “you have to test the car before you buy it.”

I snorted. “I’m not worried at all. If his kissing is anything to go by, I might die before ever getting to the main course.”

And anyway, there was this teeny-tiny celibacy detail we’d agreed on, even though I wasn’t sure exactly where we stood on that anymore. Things were changing by the minute.

“I don’t want to think about you and my brother having sex.” Aurora fake gagged while Sailor burst into laughter. “It’s probably the best thing for our friendship.”

I tilted my head, my waves cascading over my shoulder. Sometimes it was hard to gauge whether Aurora was upset or not. She had a good poker face, which I knew to be the result of her FBI training.

“I’m sorry if this upsets you and things didn’t exactly end up as planned, but as long as Royce is good with this”—whatever *this* was—“then it’s really nobody else’s business.”

Surprise flared on Aurora’s face at my statement. “Judgment, however fleeting it was, is hereby retracted.”



“And you’re right,” Sailor added softly. “Anything that happens between you and Royce is your business. But we’re here for you, always.”

My throat squeezed, making me teary-eyed, and we hugged tightly.

“We’ll always be here for each other,” Aurora vowed.

“No matter what,” Sailor echoed.

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## Chapter 16

### Royce



The small celebration at the Auclairs' went off without a hitch, and despite the obvious fatigue marring Willow's face, she was glowing.

We were almost at the private airfield where my jet was waiting for us when my phone rang. Not recognizing the number, I let it go to voicemail, then flicked a look at the passenger seat where Willow slept soundly, her bruises peppering her ivory skin.

I should have wiped Stuart off the face of the planet. I still had every intention of destroying him, and I wouldn't rest until I did.

Just as I was about to turn left into the airfield, my phone rang again. I glanced at the screen and noticed it was the same number as before.

"Yes," I barked into the phone, annoyed that someone was calling me twice in a row.

"Royce?"

"One and only."

"It's Asher."

Surprise flared inside me. Asher usually corresponded with Winston, not me. The two had grown close over the past few years thanks to their common interest in precious stones and diamonds. Once in a while, we'd do a job together—like a jungle expedition to Ghana for Marie Antoinette's diamond that Winston *had* to get back. Other times, I'd join the two for drinks or a chess match. They sucked at both.

"Really not a good time," I noted wryly.

"Good thing I'm calling you to save your ass, then."

My brows furrowed. “And how in the fuck are you planning to save my ass?”

A chuckle sounded on the other end. “The Lisbon police are looking for you. Apparently you’ve been accused of kidnapping some high profile’s wife, and of attempted manslaughter. The Harrises’ precious son,” he clarified.

“What?” I hissed, careful not to wake Willow up. “What kidnapping?” I didn’t address the manslaughter part because to be fair, it checked out.

“I’m sending you the police report,” he declared, and I pulled over to the side of the road. My phone chimed and I skimmed over the report.

“Well, that didn’t take long,” I sneered. Fucking Harris family. They were just like my father—corrupt to the core. “Fuck!” I’d counted on having at least a few days’ heads-up before Stuart pulled some shit. “Well, he got one thing wrong,” I remarked wryly.

“What’s that?”

“She’s my wife, not his.” Warmth trickled through my chest.

“Much like your brothers, I see you waste no time.” The remark struck me as odd, but before I could ponder on it, Asher continued. “I have a catamaran docked an hour from Lisbon. It can get you out of Europe. Airways will be a no-go.”

The offer was generous, but I couldn’t help my suspicion from rearing up. “And what do you want in return?”

We both knew he wasn’t doing this out of the kindness of his heart. But what he didn’t know was that I’d sign my fortune over to him if he asked. Willow was the only thing that mattered in my life.

“I’ll let you know when I decide,” he answered cryptically.

My gaze flickered over to my wife, and my mind was made up. “Drop me the pin.”

“I’ll see you there,” he responded, then ended the call.

I plugged the location into my navigation system, and followed it an hour in the opposite direction.

Once I parked, I came around the car and opened the passenger door. Willow never even stirred.

“Willow,” I rasped, nudging her shoulder softly. She’d changed into jeans and an emerald-green shirt, much to my dismay. I liked seeing her wear my shirts, so when I instructed Aurora to pack my bag, I had her put in a few extra, just for Willow. “Hey, sleepyhead,” I tried again. She was

already a heavy sleeper, but I suspected her pregnancy was playing a role here.

Brushing a few strands of hair away, I pressed a kiss to her forehead, then lifted her sleeping form into my arms and strode down to the boat.

Asher was already waiting for us, wearing black jeans and a white dress shirt, unbuttoned at the collar. All he needed was a pirate hat and he'd hit the mark.

It was ironic actually, because the fucker was known for his pirate heritage. Rumor had it that his grandfather was a robber, smuggler, but also a treasure hunter. The stories about his family's ruthlessness and legion of cargo ships circulated the business world as much as the mafia underworld.

But none of it mattered to me, because Asher was my ticket to getting out of Europe undetected.

"Did you have difficulty finding the place?" he asked, his eyes resting on Willow for a heartbeat.

"No." I looked over at the sleek catamaran. It was large enough to sail across oceans. "Do I have to navigate the catamaran at all times?"

I'd gone without sleep for days while in the service, so it wouldn't be something new, but I preferred to get at least a few hours of shut-eye each night.

"No, it has an autopilot system. It slows the boat's forward motion and keeps it relatively stationary."

I nodded, glancing to the side of the fancy catamaran. The name on the side of the boat, *Illicit Sins*, had me raising an eyebrow. "Interesting name."

"Not as interesting as the shitstorm you've drummed up."

## Chapter 17

### Asher



Portugal wasn't part of the original ship route, but a storm had me taking a detour yesterday and delivering part of the shipment via helicopter. When I encountered a problem as I approached Lisbon, fate put Royce Ashford in my path, and I took the opportunity to help us both out.

Of course, I preferred to be on the deck of one of my ships, at the mercy of the open ocean, instead of surrounded by land and people, but this was better. Royce needed a way out of Portugal, and I needed to create a diversion away from my catamaran.

The world knew my name. They thought they knew everything about me, but they didn't. No one did, least of all the Ashford brothers. I wasn't willing to reveal my connection to them.

*Yet.*

For now, I was just Asher. Their friend. The details of my connection to this fucked-up family would be revealed one day, ideally not when I was harboring one of its members and his battered bride.

It was my grandfather who taught me everything I know. He emphasized the need to keep people in your debt. And this would make it so that Royce would be indebted to me after today. Running a piracy wasn't a democracy, and we'd made it a decree to destroy any empire that stood in our way. The Ashford empire was particularly close to being in the way, but luckily for my *friends*, they were all preoccupied with their women.

"Can you navigate, or should I get you a captain?" I asked him, my eyes roaming to the woman—Willow, he'd told me—he was accused of

kidnapping, asleep in his arms. No wonder Royce had a hard-on for her. Even with her face covered in bruises, I could see she was a beauty.

"I can do it," Royce clipped. "You're not coming along?"

My lips twitched. "And be a third wheel? No, thank you." I looked back at the woman in his arms. "Just don't tank my boat or kill the girl. It's one thing to be accused of kidnapping, but being responsible for her death would land us both in prison."

Royce blinked at me, then looked down at Willow. "I'd sooner cut off my dick than hurt her."

I shook my head with disgust. Love made the world turn, but in it I saw none of the bliss, only the horror. Everything about it was poisonous, and men who let themselves fall under its spell were idiots, my half brothers included. Judging by the look on Royce's face, even a blind man could see that he was head over heels for his new wife.

"You might have to." Dark humor colored my voice. "Your wife doesn't strike me as the type to be into BDSM." A shadow crossed his face, but he quickly masked it. "However, in the unlikely event you need some whips and bondage, there's a newly refurnished room on the lower deck that's a dom's dream come true. Feel free to use it."

"Fuck you."

I chuckled. "You're not my type." I tipped my head to the side, studying him. I'd built a friendship with Winston, gotten to know Byron, and even scratched some of the surface with Kingston, but until today, Royce had kept himself at arm's length. "Besides, I'm pretty sure you'll have your hands full with your *friend*." He pressed his lips into a thin line, and I couldn't resist egging him on further. "But if you're not, give her ass to—"

I never got to finish the sentence. "You come anywhere near her and I'll be slicing off your dick."

I threw my head back and laughed. "Fine, keep your wife and her ass."

I swore I heard his teeth grinding from where I was standing.

"Send me the bill," he said, passing me by and stepping aboard the boat. "Better yet, let me buy it from you. Just make sure whatever you smuggled here has been offloaded."

I arched an eyebrow. "This is a HODOR catamaran superyacht, its starting price is listed at thirty million."

"Is that it?" He let out a soft laugh, careful not to wake Willow.

Arrogant prick. "The price just went up to fifty-five million."

And damn if he didn't pay it. I should have gone for an even hundred.

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## Chapter 18

### Willow



I woke up to an awful grinding noise.

Blinking several times, I rolled over to my side and a stretch of blue stared back at me. In disbelief, I rubbed my eyes, convinced I was seeing things. But sure as hell, the only sight for miles in any direction was the blue horizon.

Yesterday's events rushed back to me, and it felt like I'd been turned inside out all over again. Shame. Relief. Excitement. So many mixed emotions, but there was one that surpassed them all.

Love.

I couldn't remember how we got onto this boat, but I vaguely remembered being tucked into bed. And how I tugged on Royce's rough hand and asked him to stay with me. When he'd wrapped his arms around me, I'd never felt safer.

Getting to my feet, I followed the noise to a sleek kitchen with a million-dollar view. I found Royce at the little kitchen counter, dressed in black Tom Ford shorts and a white T-shirt, his ink on full display—a mountain landscape tattooed on one forearm and a large willow tree with thin branches on the other.

Bent over a small device, he seemed to be reading something on this phone.

"Good morning," I murmured, tucking a piece of my unruly hair behind my ear. He held a blender with something green and unappealing-looking in it. My nose wrinkled before I added, "I hope you're not drinking that."

Amusement filled his gaze. "I'm not. You are."



I narrowed my eyes. "I'm not drinking something that looks like a swamp."

He chuckled.

"It says here it's good for the baby." My mouth parted in shock as I eyed the green liquid with distaste. "Fresh spinach, blended with blackberries and bananas. The pregnancy blogs promise it does wonders for morning sickness."

I flushed, my heart growing warm. If I could see myself right now, I imagined I'd find cartoon hearts in place of my eyes.

I extended my hand without another word, wrapping my fingers around the glass he'd just finished pouring.

He smiled and said, "Good girl," which did some messed-up things to my body.

*Get yourself together, Willow,* I scolded myself.

Royce had always been thoughtful and caring. This morning's gesture was no different.

Taking a sip, I sat down as the green liquid trickled down my throat.

"Hmmm, it's pretty good. Definitely better than it looks," I said, then took another sip.

"How's your room?" he asked.

"The view is amazing." I grinned, the tension of the few last months finally loosening. "What is there not to like?"

"Excellent."

"Where are you sleeping?"

"Down the hallway from your cabin." He poured himself a glass of the same thing and downed it all in one go. "You look good in my shirt."

I swallowed, blushing a deeper shade of red, and shifted on my chair. I was comfortable with Royce, my friend. I didn't know what to do with Royce, my husband. My emotions were all over the place, and so were my hormones.

"So how did we get on the boat, and where are we going?"

He raised a brow, leaning back in the chair. "Are you worried?"

I shook my head, biting the inside of my cheek. "Just making conversation."

"Do I make you nervous, baby?"

I scoffed. "You wish. Now stop fucking with me and tell me our plans."

He grinned. “We’ll stay off-grid for a bit. Sail the seas. Have an extended honeymoon.”

I swallowed. “Do you think the Harrises will do something?”

He shrugged, clearly unbothered. “We’ll worry about Stuart and his family when the time comes.”

I sighed, happy to push the thought aside for now. Glancing around the beautiful boat, I was once again shocked by the luxury. “So whose boat is this anyway? And what *kind* of boat is it?” I looked around, taking in the split-level decks and impressed by every inch I’d seen of this boat so far. The living spaces were designed with comfort in mind, the lush cabins were a dream come true, and there were even parts of the boat with a glass-bottom window to see the seas below.

He stood up, rinsed his glass, and put it in the little dishwasher. A freaking dishwasher, on a boat!

“It’s a catamaran,” he explained. Royce was a billionaire, so he remained unimpressed. Me, on the other hand? I was foaming at the mouth. “A super catamaran, which basically just means it’s twice as fancy and comes with all the amenities of a regular yacht.”

I scoffed—who was going to tell this guy I’d never even been on a “regular” yacht, let alone knew what it was supposed to look like. I finished my own drink and joined him by the sink, but before I could wash it, he took the glass out of my hold.

“Are you going to wait on me, Mr. Ashford?” I teased, bumping my shoulder against his playfully. He shut the dishwasher door, his low and dark chuckle filling the little space, before he grabbed my hips and set me on the counter, spreading my legs to stand between them.

The warmth of his body made me shiver in delight while so many naughty fantasies swirled in my mind. Ones I hadn’t allowed myself to imagine in a long time when it came to my best friend—correction, husband.

“I’ll do whatever you want, Willow.” He leaned forward, his mouth brushing against my sensitive earlobe. “Just say the word.”

A strangled laugh that came out sounding like a moan vibrated in my chest, and I had to clear my throat to get myself together.

“Can we go swimming?” was how I decided to respond to his offer.

“Nude?”

I giggled, swatting him gently on his inked forearm. “No, not nude.”

Although, it did sound tempting.



My ring sparkled in the sun, almost like a reminder of my new reality, as we disembarked in the Canary Islands. Restaurants lined the striking golden-sand beaches, and the water glistened turquoise beneath the midday sun.

Royce wore aviator sunglasses under a Prada bucket hat, hiding most of his face. I opted for a wide-brim straw hat that kept the sun off my face. Hand in hand, we looked just like any other couple here on their honeymoon.

"In all the years I've visited Portugal with my parents, we've never made it here," I murmured, my eyes darting left and right, soaking it all in. "It's beautiful."

"It's okay," Royce agreed.

"Just okay?"

"Too crowded."

"You can't blame people. Who wouldn't want to visit this piece of heaven?" Royce grimaced, and I pinched his side, a chuckle slipping from my lips. I felt lighter here, and I wasn't about to let his grumpiness dampen our day. "Why did we stop, then?"

"We need supplies. Food." Just as he said it, we walked past a local fruit stand and his steps came to an abrupt stop in front of it. I followed suit, scanning the choices until I stopped at one, my heart fluttering in my chest.

*Pineapples.* The memory came bustling in, mocking my stupidity. Ironic how a single decision could alter one's path. Three months ago, I gave a seemingly nice man a chance. Nothing could have ever prepared me for what I'd have to withstand, only to discover that love simply wasn't in the cards for me. I was lucky to have Royce and our agreement, and I would do everything to protect my baby, but I knew it was time to let go of my childish dreams. I wasn't a girl anymore; there was no sense in harboring a silly crush on my best friend's brother.

"Should we get a few pineapples?" Royce's tone was usually easy to read, but not today. I shielded my eyes from the sun and turned my head to look at my handsome husband, but it was hard to see anything behind those sunglasses.

I shifted uncomfortably. "Umm, I don't know."

"Willow..." Something in the way he said my name sounded like a plea, and it was the final push I needed to let him in a bit. He'd been so patient with me the last few days, it was the least I could do.

"I hate pineapple cake," I admitted with a sigh. "Not that anything... happened on... on that front." Stuart never went down on me, and ironically, I was grateful for it now. "He never... We never..."

*Ugh.* Since when was I uncomfortable talking about sex? But I hated to think about the early days with Stuart. It filled me with melancholy and disappointment. Not because I loved him, but because I was stupid enough to settle.

"Excellent." He nodded as if satisfied with my statement. "Sponge cakes suck anyhow. There'll be no more of that in our lives." He turned to the kind-faced woman. "Three pineapples, please."

Despite still reeling from the memory of that stupid cake and that stupid night, I chuckled. "Why do we need three?"

He shrugged. "Third time's the charm, right?"

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## Chapter 19

### Royce



I loved the hold my wife had on me.

Heat circulated through my veins as I watched Willow sunbathe, her toes in the pool and her face tilted up to the sun. It was impossible not to look at her, every inch of her stunning—even with bruises, though they were slowly fading away.

Willow and I had been years in the making, we just didn't know it. Or maybe it was me who didn't see it. All that mattered was that moving forward, nothing would keep me away from her. Not the law. Not the congressman. And *certainly* not his spineless son.

I hadn't touched her. I hadn't fucked her. *Yet*. But I was determined to memorize every inch of her flawless, exposed skin.

Scattered days and hours of the past week had been some of the best of my entire life. We always had a good time together, but it was just the two of us here, and we enjoyed spending time talking, playing games, and even fishing. I had no intention of rushing things with her.

Willow's gaze slid over to meet mine, and I watched a soft exhale part her lips. The moment stretched, pulling us into our own bubble that promised bliss and a happily-ever-after.

"Royce, you keep looking at me like that and I won't be able to keep my lips off you."

Her playful statement coaxed a smile from me, but there was an unmistakable breathlessness to her tone that tempted the sinner in me. There'd been so many small moments like this, and each time I had to fight the urge to fist her hair and coax her into my bed.

But I wanted her to be sure and ready for all of me. She had me in a choke hold, but my inconvenient *honor* left me with an aching dick.

“I wouldn’t object to a kiss from my wife,” I retorted teasingly. What I didn’t let her see was how tempted I was to beg her for it. And I had never begged for anything in my entire life.

Willow eyed me with curiosity and something else that she kept close to her chest.

“What’s on your mind?” I said softly.

She sighed for a moment, and I thought she might open up, but what she said instead sent shockwaves through me.

“Do you ever think about our first kiss?”

She flashed me a tentative smile, insecurities I wasn’t accustomed to seeing in her glaring back at me, and it dawned on me suddenly that my well-intentioned rejection might have caused more harm than good.

“All the time,” I admitted, my voice rough. I didn’t know how to tell her that back then, it felt wrong to touch her, take her virginity, and expose her to my darkness. Of course I wanted her—I wanted everything she was willing to give me.

“Yeah, me too.” Her admission sent a pleasant warmth through me. “But I’ve also loved being friends. If we’d kissed and done... other things, I would have missed out on all the fun times with your crazy obsessive ex-girlfriends.”

“And I would have missed out on beating up all your ex-boyfriends.”

She snorted. “Only a few.” I fought a laugh at her tone. “Was the kiss so bad?”

I sobered up and took her chin between my two fingers. It wasn’t until she met my gaze that I uttered my next words. “It was the best kiss of my life.” Her soft gasp followed my confession.

Her delicate brows furrowed. “But... How? You’ve had so many girlfriends since...”

I brushed my lips over hers lightly, and her cheeks turned an adorable shade of pink. “The only constant in my life has been you.”

The sound of a boat horn startled both of us, breaking the moment. Willow slid into the pool, her lithe body now hidden from my view.

“Maybe you’ll kiss me again one of these days, Royce. I just hope you don’t wait too long.”

Then she sank beneath the water, and my lips tugged up.

Maybe, just maybe, Willow was ready for my darkness.

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## Chapter 20

### Willow



We'd been sailing for the past two weeks. I had a feeling that Royce was doing everything in his power to avoid a conflict with the Harris family. However, every time I questioned him about it, he offered vague answers and changed the subject.

We were taking the long way home, but I didn't complain. The yacht was lavish, sunshine abundant, and food delicious.

Dark, tinted windows ran along the side of the catamaran, meaning we had complete privacy from any curious onlookers when we docked in exotic places. Although the name on the side of the boat, *Illicit Sins*, probably let everyone's imaginations run wild. Mine definitely did.

If only there were some illicit sins happening between us, but Royce remained a perfect gentleman.

Except, there was a shiny gold band on both our fingers that served as a healthy reminder.

We got into a routine as we sailed island to island, coastline to coastline.

Every morning he fixed breakfast and woke me up with the scent of freshly brewed coffee, then he used the satellite to connect into his business network and work on his various surveillance assignments, his outdoor gear empire, and real estate portfolios. Lunch was my domain, which we'd taken to eating on the upper deck. Dinners we always prepared together, working around each other with an ease I'd never found with anyone else. My favorite part, though, was when we could finally relax and cozy up on the couch together.



Today was no exception, but unlike previous times, Royce disappeared into his room shortly after I showed up, mumbling something about my silky pajama shorts and matching sleeveless top.

He'd stared at me with a burning gaze that I practically felt on my skin, like the sun's caress on a cold winter's day. I thought—hoped—he'd finally touch me, kiss me, but instead, he bolted out of the room like the devil was on his heels.

Alone and edgy, I attempted to focus on the employment ads that stared back at me from the laptop, but restless energy got the best of me. I threw myself back on the couch in the lounge area, staring out the boat's dark windows, seeing nothing but the glow of the full moon.

I wanted to be around Royce, hear him talk and tease, maybe even feel his body brush against my sensitive flesh. I'd heard that pregnancy hormones made you incredibly horny, but this was more than that.

My eyes flicked to the clock on the side table, the green digits showing 10:00 p.m.

"Maybe I should masturbate... just to take the edge off," I muttered under my breath. I considered it for a moment, imagining how it would end if Royce found me that way. Would he do something about it? I shook my head and sighed. "Nah, don't be ridiculous."

*Talking to yourself was ridiculous too*, scolded a voice inside my head.

With a ragged huff, I slid off the couch, feeling deflated and unsatisfied. If I wasn't pregnant, I'd go for a nightcap to cure my restlessness and insomnia, but as it was, that wasn't an option.

I padded toward my bedroom, my heart thumping and heat twisting through my belly.

From the corner of my eye, I spotted a light pouring from Royce's cabin down the hallway from my own room, and my heart tripped over itself with excitement. Before I could think it through, I walked toward it.

The door was just barely ajar, but enough to hear a faint, growling moan. I stopped in my tracks as the sound shattered through the air and tingles raced through my body. Unable to resist, I leaned forward, and my breath caught.

Royce was inside, splayed out on the big bed, totally naked with a bottle of lube open on the nightstand. The soft glow threw shadows over his muscular, inked body. I stood there, my mouth forming a perfect O, and attempted to look away.

Okay, fine. I wasn't really trying. Blame those pesky hormones—I was here for the show.

My gaze trailed the length of him, arrested by the sight of his strong hand wrapped around his shaft.

He was jerking off.

A raw magnetism and almost animalistic energy permeated the air as I watched him clutch at the silk sheet, his thickly muscled thighs spread wide to accommodate his hands, one pulling hard and slow at his cock, the other cupping his sac. I felt his grunts deep in my core.

His head was thrown back against the stack of pillows, neck corded with tension and pleasure staining his beautiful face. I wouldn't be able to tear my eyes from him if I tried.

My thighs trembled with need as his rugged masculinity drew me in, tempting me with the promise of exquisite pleasure that I knew only this man could give me. He pulled those thick fingers up his shaft again and a bead of precum pooled on the head of his cock. I licked my lips greedily. My mouth literally watered, and I gulped while picturing that thick, long cock between my lips.

It would be so easy to push this door open and beg him to have his way with me, but the fear of rejection held me back. So, like a voyeur, I stood there, admiring his erection that would be the envy of any dildo store.

Dazed, confused, and uncomfortably aroused, my eyes shot back up to my husband's face to find his eyes on me. Something dark and sinful burned in those coal-colored depths. I didn't react, my body refusing to move, and slowly, Royce wrapped a palm tighter around his swollen length.

His tense muscles clenched as pleasure racked through him, a hiss escaping through his clenched teeth as he worked faster and harder, fucking into his fist with long, brutal strokes.

I moaned, he grunted.

My gaze followed the movements as he squeezed almost violently each time he passed over the crown.

My own arousal dampened my underwear, escaping and trickling down the inside of my thigh. I ached for him, and my mind stumbled over visions of sex with this man, what his big cock would feel like inside me and what he would taste like—salty or musky or sweet.

Could I even fit him inside my mouth?

The dirty, debaucherous thoughts awakened a starved beast within me. I had never been into voyeurism, but suddenly it felt like I'd been missing out. The pleasure of simply watching this scene unfold elicited more desire from me than any ex-lover had before.

Rooted to the spot by Royce's heavy gaze, my breathing turned harsher as I waited for the inevitable. There were so many times I'd tried to picture this man coming, the face he'd make and the sated look that would no doubt replace the usual tension on his face, but nothing had come even close to this.

And I hadn't even touched him.

His hand contracted around his swelling cock, and I sucked a sharp breath through my teeth when his tempo turned erratic. His muscles bulged as he let out a breathy "*Willow*" before closing his eyes and climaxing.

His cock thrust one last time, shooting cum across his six-pack. His orgasm seemed to go on forever, spurting out of him and dripping off his fingers as he kept hold of his softening cock.

The sight was such a turn-on that for the first time in my life, I understood the draw of watching from the shadows.

My breathing was labored like I'd just run a marathon. My chest rose and fell, the pulse between my thighs beating like a drum and ringing in my ears.

I startled when Royce slid out of the bed, his eyes leaving me as he headed for his en suite. The moment his muscular ass disappeared from view, I fled like a thief caught in the act.

I made it back to my room on wobbly legs. My skin was hot, and my nipples were so hard they could cut glass. Even the faintest brush of air on my sensitive skin made me tremble.

I stripped down and slid into bed, shivering with the yearning that burned through me. I wanted him. I needed a release, yet as I dipped a hand between my legs, I found the thought lackluster. And lonely.

The sight of Royce was branded into my mind, and my body craved the release that I instinctively knew only he could bring me. But he only wanted his hand, not me, and that left me horny... and indescribably sad.

## Chapter 21

### Royce



Your brother Byron wants to use this picture to announce the nuptials.

The text message was short, much like most messages from Willow's parents. They weren't tech-savvy, and they never would be.

The sun poured through the cabin windows of my makeshift office. The usual catamarans had to be navigated at all times. This one had a navigation system that was first class with an autopilot option, and a destination already programmed in it. It let me detour, but not change the end destination, which I found peculiar.

We were somewhere between Europe and the Americas, but the location wasn't what had my interest.

It was the attachment Willow's parents sent with the text.

The more I stared at it, the stronger this peculiar feeling of possessiveness gripped me. It was a photo that someone had snapped during our vows, the grandeur of the church behind us, but the most magnificent sight was Willow. Her, flashing a smile that could disarm armies, and me, with a look in my eyes that communicated only one truth: *Mine*.

Her bruises were invisible to the unsuspecting eye, and I was glad for the person who was proficient in photoshop. This would be a photo we'd show our children one day.

The next file contained the photo of us that was snapped when Willow graduated college. She wore her gown, and someone had captured the moment she'd taken her cap and thrown it up in the air, her free hand in mine.

My lips tugged up at the memory of how Willow panicked the next second, not wanting the hat to fall on the ground or get mixed up with someone else's, so I had to jump up in the air to catch it. Fuck, I'd descend to hell and climb to the gates of heaven just to keep her happy.

My mind flitted back to the night a week ago when she caught me jerking off in my cabin. I hadn't slept much since then, still tasting the disappointment I felt after returning to my room to find Willow gone. I couldn't concentrate on work this morning, my mind completely stuck on my wife. I'd jacked off so much since then, my cock was painfully chafed.

I had to fuck her soon or I'd lose my goddamned mind. But I needed her willing and open-minded, and I suspected she still wasn't ready, because each time I hinted at the incident, she'd change the subject, a sadness briefly crossing her features before she replaced it with a pleasant expression.

A text message popped up, snapping me out of my thoughts.

Byron: You could have told me.

Me: Tell you what?

Byron: Don't be an idiot. The world thinks you've kidnapped her.

Me: And I care because...?

Byron: For fuck's sake, Royce. We don't need to stir shit with the Harris family. Not after what happened with Winston.

A frown touched my face. He was referring to the manner of our father's death—to the way he died. We needed to keep the media away from the Ashfords, not draw attention. But there was no way it could have been avoided, not with Willow's engagement to Stuart and his family's connections.

Byron: When is your honeymoon ending?

My fingers drummed an absentminded rhythm on the desk.

Me: In a few weeks or so.

I was playing it by ear, but for now, I knew it was best to keep away from prying eyes—and any country with loose extradition laws. Stuart knew better than to go to the police, but unfortunately his parents didn't.

And with their connections, they could cause some serious damage. In fact, from the sounds of it, they were doing it already.

*Ha, kidnapped.* As if I'd ever cause distress to Willow. That was Stuart's forte, not mine.

So Willow and I would remain off-grid for a bit. We'd try to remain on the boat, at least until Willow's bruises completely disappeared. To avoid causing Willow additional stress after what she endured, I'd keep her in the dark until this situation was resolved.

When things were back to some version of normal, we'd go back home—wherever that might be. Willow was close to her parents, so Portugal might be it for us, especially since my siblings had relocated to Europe too.

"Yeah, things are great," I muttered under my breath. Aside from the fact that I was constantly fighting the urge to fuck her. I pushed a hand through my hair, flicking a glance at the clock. It was ten a.m. and Willow was still fast asleep. She needed it, and granted, we'd been staying up late.

Last night we played Monopoly, and it turned out there were things I didn't know about my new wife after all. She was an extremely sore loser. After I'd taken all her properties, she tried crying, claiming foul play, and then *accidentally* knocked over the board.

It was an unattractive trait in everyone but Willow. She was cute as fuck when she pouted.

The phone buzzed again.

Byron: Let me know when you figure it out. The press will learn of your marriage today. I still want to know how in the hell you and Willow happened.

I ignored his message. It wasn't as if the Ashford brothers were known for disclosing our objects of desire.

Anyhow, another few weeks on this boat might work out for the best. The frenzy would settle by the time we disembarked. Hopefully.

I turned my phone off and continued working. I had a business to run, a wife to feed and entertain. My brother and his twenty questions would have to wait.

It wasn't long before a knock shattered the silence and I flicked my gaze up to find the only other passenger on the catamaran, and fuck was she a sight to behold. Wild hair. Sleepy expression. I dragged my gaze down her tank top to the shorts that clung to her hips and thighs, exposing her

smooth, golden legs. She was barefoot, as per usual, and her nails looked freshly painted.

“Come in.”

Willow entered, stifling a yawn. “I can’t believe I slept in so long.”

“You’re growing a life,” I pointed out. “It’s hard work.”

I watched, mesmerized, as a light blush crept up her neck. I wondered if her skin would turn pink like that when I—*no*. I wouldn’t be going there again, not unless I wanted to walk around all day sporting a hard-on.

She took a seat in front of me and attempted to comb her fingers through her hair. “Honestly, I still can’t believe it.”

“You have to be a bit more specific. Believe what?”

She leaned back in the chair, her eyes meeting mine as she rubbed her flat stomach. “That I’m pregnant. That we’re married. That we’re in the middle of the ocean. Take your pick.”

I interlocked my fingers behind my head.

“Not a dream come true?” I asked coolly, the thought of her being unhappy sending a surge of irritation through me.

“Uh, well...” Willow ran a hand over her belly, a sheepish look crossing her face. “It’s definitely not the normal way things are done.”

A dark flame kindled in my chest before I smothered it.

“I told you already, fuck normal,” I retorted dryly. She studied me, and I lost myself in wondering whether her eyes would be more green or blue in the throes of an orgasm.

“It doesn’t bother you that people will be talking?” Willow asked, pulling me back to the present.

“No.” Rule number one of the wealthy: never appear weak. I’d made my choice and come out the winner over Stuart, and Willow was mine. If anyone even attempted to drag her name, I’d end them personally.

Maybe we could have gotten by without the pregnancy, but I already considered the baby as part of my—*our* unit. Just like I’d considered Willow. She was pregnant, and that was that. She was mine. The baby would be mine, all their todays and tomorrows.

“You know, many women will hate me for taking you off the market.”

I shrugged. “They don’t matter.”

“Won’t you miss sex?”

I swung back and forth in the chair, then propped my legs on the table. “If you’re offering something, just come out and say it.”

Her cheeks turned a deep shade of crimson. “Come on, Royce. Stop fucking with me.”

“Now there’s an idea.” I smirked at her. “I could bend you over this desk, gag you, and then fuck you while you’re choking on the arousal that’s currently drenching your panties.”

She shot to her feet, every inch of exposed skin flushing pink.

“Jesus, Royce. Give a girl some warning when you’re about to drop a bomb like that. Is that your jam?”

“My *jam*?”

“Your kink,” she clarified.

“And what do you know about my kinks?”

She shrugged. “Not much. Just rumors over the years...”

I gave her a sardonic look before saying, “If you think gagging you is kinky—”

She put her palms up, silencing me.

“I can take a hint,” she murmured, her breaths coming in short pants. “You ready for breakfast? Kink talk on an empty stomach just won’t do.” I stood up, and her eyes dropped down the length of me. “I can’t decide whether this ‘rich playboy by the beach’ look suits you better than your usual all-black leather get-ups.”

I rounded the table and hooked an arm over her shoulders. “*Wife*.” Fuck, I loved calling her that a bit too much. “I’m anything but a boy.”

She shot me some side-eye.

“Funny,” she said flatly. “Who knew my husband had such a sense of humor?”

My mouth tugged up while my heart somersaulted like an Olympic gymnast. If I loved calling her wife, hearing her call me husband was God tier. My obsession with her was quickly spiraling out of control, although it might’ve been there all along, lying dormant.

“What can I say, you bring out the best in me.”

She rolled her eyes, but I caught the way her mouth tugged up on one side. “Cut the shit, Royce.”

“But you love my bullshit.” We got to the small dining room area and I pulled a chair out. “I have breakfast ready. Let me serve you.”

Her eyebrows arched at my double meaning, but instead of taking the bait, she gave me a quick wink.



“It’s only fair. I am your new bride after all,” she said, mischief and something else glinting in her eyes.

A trickle of heat washed down my spine and it took me several beats to realize I was still standing there, staring at her. We were playing a dangerous game, one that would surely take us to the point of no return. I wondered if Willow was aware of that. She may appear gentle and sweet, but I’d been catching flashes of something darker in her eyes.

I knew once I had Willow, *all* of her, there’d be no going back.

## Willow

Sunlight bounced off the ripples of blue water surrounding us, and even though I had sunglasses on, the glare was so bright I had to lower my head to avoid it.

Royce lay next to me on the deck, a foot casually hanging off the side of the catamaran. He was the poster child for billionaire playboys right now, his aviator sunglasses covering his dark eyes and his black swim trunks slung low on his bronzed hips.

My gaze locked on the hand he had nestled on my upper thigh, his wedding ring glinting in the sun. It wasn’t until I was leaving my parents’ place that I realized where the wedding rings had come from. The fact that my *mãe* had given Royce my grandparents’ rings spoke volumes.

It was her blessing—loud and clear.

My smile widened as I traced the band that marked him as mine. Despite the stress of worrying what Stuart and his family would do, I couldn’t help but enjoy this alone time with Royce.

We’d laughed and played tourist in some stunning places, but we hadn’t really discussed expectations. Celibacy was... hard. Especially now, as I leered at my husband’s strong, muscular body even a nun couldn’t resist.

He pushed his glasses up on his head. “What are you reading?”

I cleared my throat before replying, “Um, just a novel.”

Of course the novel in my lap wasn’t helping matters either. It was a retelling of Christian Grey and his sexual experiences prior to meeting the innocent Anastasia. The book was so hot I half expected to burst into flames.

But I couldn’t focus on the pages. I could feel Royce’s lustful gaze on me, caressing every inch that wasn’t covered by my bikini. I felt it roam

over me, touching every crevice, stroking each sensitive spot.

He propped himself up on his elbow, never removing his hand from my thigh. "What kind?"

"The kind you read." *More like the kind you've probably lived*, I thought with a smirk.

"Read me a chapter." I could hear the devilish smile in his words. "Please."

I started to sweat and it had nothing to do with the blazing sun.

"It's not that interesting."

"That's okay." He squeezed my thigh. "I could use a nap."

I let out an incredulous breath. Either he knew exactly what this book was about or he was distracting me.

"I never took you for the napping type."

"I could be."

I faked a scowl, but it came out as a lopsided grin. "You're not old enough for naps."

"You're right," he agreed, threading his fingers through mine. "We could always try a *different* kind of afternoon activity."

I pasted on an impudent smile. "Can you be more specific?"

His dark smile sent sparks through me, and sweat began to run in rivulets down my back.

"I want to fuck your brains out right now," he said, his voice turning dark and smoky, "and have you begging for my cock like a good little whore."

*Well, it seemed like celibacy was being thrown right off that table we'd put it on.*

"I want to be your whore," I whispered after a beat.

Heat blossomed in the pit of my stomach, and the air pulsed with an electric current. Blood roared in my ears, drowning out everything but the promise in his gaze.

"No matter what?"

My throat squeezed at the raw lust I saw in his eyes.

A soft sigh drifted from my lips and I whispered, "No matter what."

Victory flashed in his dark eyes.

He knew he had me.

## Chapter 22

### Royce



The moment she'd uttered those words, I all but dragged Willow into my cabin.

My cock was so fucking hard, it almost punched a hole through my swim shorts. Except, deep down, insecurities ran rampant. Fear that if I showed Willow the extent of my depraved desires, she'd jump into the ocean and swim to the nearest island.

I'd have to take it slow, because she was important to me. She mattered more than the women who'd shared my bed in the past. I'd enjoyed my time with them, and I respected them, but they'd been an outlet.

"Please don't tell me you're changing your mind." Her voice dragged my focus to her full lips.

"Never." It felt like every path had led us to this moment. It felt right. Willow had my last name, and my ring was on her finger. "Lose the bikini," I said, my voice soft, and she shivered at my command. "Now, wife."

I heard her gasp, but she didn't hesitate. She pulled at the string behind her neck with slightly shaking hands and undid her top, letting the flimsy material fall soundlessly to the floor. I watched her hook her delicate fingers on her bottoms, shimmy out of them, then step to the side.

I clenched my teeth so hard my jaw hurt, but it was better than focusing on my aching cock, eager to bury itself inside her. Silence dominated the room, broken only by our harsh breaths and the crash of waves against the hull.

I walked to the dresser and leaned against it, then turned to watch my wife through hooded eyes. I wanted to bring her pleasure, make her moan,

make her *mine*.

She licked her lips and waited for my next command while I devoured her sun-kissed skin, forgetting how to blink, how to breathe. Jesus Christ, she was gorgeous. Firm, full tits with peaked, rosy nipples that I couldn't wait to bite. Slim legs. Round ass that was full enough to grab with my large palm.

My eyes came back to her breasts, lingering on the way her nipples stood at attention.

"Crawl to me like a good wife."

Her chest was rising and falling with every breath. She stared at me as she sank to her hands and knees, goose bumps breaking over her bare skin.

With each move, I could hear the slickness of her arousal and smell the tang of it perfuming the air. Her breathing grew choppy as she crawled closer, her eyes greener than ever before.

She stopped in front of me and I circled her before coming back in front of her.

"Want me to ruin you, make you my little fucktoy?"

A soft moan escaped her mouth. *Fuck*, there was no way I was going to last long enough to do everything I'd been imagining.

"Yes," she whimpered. "Please."

Her eagerness went straight to my groin. I snaked my hand into her hair, fisting it with one hand as I pulled off my trunks with the other. My cock sprung out, hard and ready for her, the swollen head dripping with precum.

She stared up at me with hunger and so much trust.

I fisted her hair and tugged it back until she stared straight up at me, then I rubbed my thumb over her bottom lip before saying, "Now be a good girl and choke on my cock."

She parted her lips and I thrust into her hot mouth, pushing deeper until I hit her throat.

"Fuck." My grunt had her moaning, and the sound vibrated through me. "If it's too much, blink twice." I tugged on her hair harder, barely holding on to my control. "Blink once so I know you understand."

She blinked up at me, then licked and sucked on my cock like the perfect wife she was. She worked herself up to a steady rhythm, and fuck if it wasn't exactly how I liked it.

She bobbed her head up and down, and I showered her in praise. "*Such a good little wife. You want more? I know you can take it, sweetheart.*"

She moaned, and I thrust deeper into her throat, pulling her hair harder as she sucked me enthusiastically. The only sounds filling the space were my ragged breaths and her gurgles, her eyes watering from my size.

But she never tapped out.

My other hand shot to the back of her head, my abs shaking from the effort not to explode down her throat. "That's it," I growled. "Suck that cock."

Her pleasure-glazed eyes remained locked to mine as her hand drifted between her legs, but before she could touch herself, I yanked her off my shaft and took her mouth in a hard kiss.

"From now on, your pleasure is mine," I rasped against her lips, my voice hoarse. "Not another man. Not your fingers. Not your toys." I reached between our bodies, parting her thighs, and slid my fingers through her slippery folds. She was so wet they were drenched within seconds. My other hand closed around her throat. "Understood?"

"Yes." Her pussy clenched around my fingers.

"Who do you belong to?"

"You."

"Whose woman are you?"

"Y-yours," Willow whispered, her eyes hooded. Her skin was flushed and her eyes glimmered with arousal. "I'm your woman."

"That's right." I pumped my fingers into her core, then slipped them out and thrust them into her mouth.

She moaned, sucking on them eagerly, and I hummed in approval as she lapped at her own juices, the sight and her sounds the most erotic thing I'd ever experienced. And I'd seen my share of shit.

"Are you going to fuck me now?" Her tone was desperate, and the way she panted made my cock twitch.

I smiled tightly. "Just remember, Mrs. Ashford." I nudged her backward, the backs of her knees hitting the bed. I dropped her on the mattress, her ivory skin looking like a dream against my crimson sheets. Her full breasts bounced, tempting me further. "You asked for it."

## Chapter 23

### Willow



**R**oyce's muscular body hovered over me, and my hips arched up eagerly, rubbing myself against his erection. The heat of his body and the feel of his hard tip brushing against my entrance had me fighting the imminent orgasm.

He fleetingly brushed his mouth against mine, but it was enough to send my heart racing.

He kissed a wet line down my neck and torso before he reached down and grasped my ankles, spreading them apart.

He dropped his head between my legs, kissing the inside of my thigh and peppering kisses up until his mouth connected with my throbbing core.

"You smell insane, baby," he murmured, skating kisses over my pussy before dipping his tongue into my entrance. My hips bucked, grinding against his stubble, and I thought I'd come right there and then.

"I need more," I begged, whimpering and thrashing against him. Pleasure razed a burning path to my core, destroying everything in its wake. I wanted to perish underneath him.

He chuckled. "Greedy little wife."

The lust in his voice only sizzled my blood further, and I clawed at his sheets.

"*Please.*" I moaned as his tongue swept up my navel and explored my breast. He sucked the nipple into his mouth, his teeth grazing it lightly, and arousal taunted me. He must have realized I was on the edge because he used his free hand to pinch my other nipple before pulling his mouth away completely.

He dropped back between my legs, licking me from entrance to clit, and his growl vibrated through me. His wet tongue had me screaming out, and the pressure in my core became almost blinding.

He ran his rough palms down my legs and hooked them over his wide shoulders, then kissed my pussy tenderly—excruciatingly so.

“Please, Royce,” I panted. “I need more.”

“What my woman wants, my woman gets,” he murmured, and pushed his tongue inside me. *In and out. In and out.* I ran my fingers through his hair, grabbing fistfuls of his dark strands as he tongue-fucked me.

My hands slipped to cup his head, and I tilted my hips up to give him better access. He continued to lap at my pussy as he brought his hands to mine, our fingers intertwining.

One last thrust of his tongue, and I erupted. I came so hard my ears rang and I trembled against his mouth. The world ceased to exist for a moment, and if I thought I would perish before, I was six feet under now.

He crawled up my body, his hard shaft against my throbbing, hot entrance as his gaze met mine.

“Ready for me, baby?” His breathing matched my own, and the reverence in his eyes made my heart skip a beat.

My answer was hooking my legs around his hips and wrapping my arms around his middle. The head of his erection pushed against my entrance as he leaned down, our hands still interlocked above my head. He kissed me, wet and hot, messy and consuming, then thrust deep inside me.

“Fuck, you feel so good,” he rasped, his voice hoarse.

He eased out with exquisite slowness, only to thrust into me again, burying himself to the hilt.

I cried out, and he stilled instantly.

“Don’t you fucking stop,” I growled, and he chuckled but resumed his movements.

He picked up the speed, pistoning into me with a relentlessness I could’ve only dreamed of. My hips moved, meeting his thrusts, as my obscene moaning and whimpering filled the space between us.

He kissed me hard, our tongues tangling just like our bodies, our fingers locked together. Embers burning hotter, he thrust deeper, and suddenly the pressure exploded inside me again, dragging me down into oblivion. As I climaxed, he roared out my name, thrusting hard one last time, then stilling as his seed spilled inside me.

Eventually, my eyes fluttered open to find his already on me. They were filled with a deep contentment and something else I couldn't quite decipher.

He peppered soft kisses over my face and the corner of my mouth before his forehead lowered onto mine while he remained inside me.

I realized then that this was exactly what I'd been searching for for the past decade.

And subconsciously, I knew he had always been the one for me.

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## Chapter 24

### Royce



Morning sun filtered through the cabin windows while Willow slept soundlessly next to me, her limbs tangled around me like vines. I pressed a kiss to her shoulder, a small sigh leaving her lips, but she didn't wake up. I'd tired her out last night—or I should say this morning—and by the sounds of her soft snores, I didn't expect her to wake up anytime soon.

I operated fine on minimal shut-eye, thanks to my time in the service. The same couldn't be said for Willow. She got cranky, and she knew it.

I slid out of bed and went to check on the navigation and positioning. I'd been using a technique called "heaving to" and an autopilot system when I wasn't on the deck. It slowed the boat's forward motion and it kept it relatively stationary.

Satisfied that we were still on track to hit land in a few days, I made us some coffee and breakfast, and then returned to bed just as Willow stirred.

Her cheeks flushed, she met my gaze, and a smile touched my lips. I placed the tray on the bedside table and gave her a quick peck.

"Good morning. Sleep well?"

"Like a baby." Her hooded eyes traveled down my body. "You should wear sweatpants more often," she husked. "And nothing else. Starting now."

I chuckled.

"I'll take that under consideration, wife." I loved when she was playful like this. "Hungry?"

“Like a wolf.” She stretched, then patted the spot next to her. The sparkle in her eyes made something dark and possessive travel through my chest. *I want to be the cause of that sparkle for the rest of my life*, I thought. “Will you eat with me?”

“I’d rather eat your pussy,” I said, a smug grin creeping over my lips as she let out a strangled laugh. “It’s the most delicious meal I’ve ever had.”

She lifted her head and pressed a soft kiss on my mouth. “None of that until you eat.”

“I was going to,” I grumbled.

Her lips twitched. “Not until you eat *real* food. And stop saying pussy so early in the morning or I’ll start saying cock.”

A smile threatened to spill from my lips. “As long as it’s my cock you’re referring to.”

“Hmmm, I’m not sure.”

I rolled her over, pinning her arms above her head, and she let out a squeal.

“You better be sure,” I growled, but her laugh was contagious, and I had a hard time keeping a serious face.

“I’m joking,” she teased. “It’s always your cock I’m thinking about.”

My shoulders relaxed and I released her wrists. “Good girl.”

Willow had been embedded into my very being for such a long time that I couldn’t even fathom a life without her. And over the past weeks, it had become clear that being apart from her was no longer an option. She soothed the savage beast inside me, and while I yearned to have her in all the salacious ways I could think of, I also didn’t want to hurt her or scare her away.

Now that I’d had her—tasted her—it was impossible to go back to the way things were. She was my lover, my friend... my fucking wife. Her happiness took priority over my own needs.

I reached over to grab a cup of decaf coffee and handed her the mug.

“I read a few pregnancy books, and saw that one cup is okay during pregnancy.” In fact, I’d done extensive research and called several OB/GYNs who were now on my speed dial, but I’d keep that to myself for now. I didn’t want to alarm her with my somewhat obsessive nature. We were best friends, so she’d seen hints of it, but that barely scratched the surface.

Her fingers wrapped around it and she sighed in delight. “It smells divine. Thank you,” she murmured, her eyes meeting mine over the rim of it as she took a sip. “No coffee for you?”

“I already had two cups.”

Her eyes widened. “How long have you been awake?”

“Few hours.”

“Your sleeping habits still haven’t improved?” Over the years, Willow had learned that no matter what time of day or night, she could always get in touch with me. Sometimes, she’d call and talk to me about the most boring things she could think of in hopes of putting me to sleep. It never worked, but I loved hearing her voice, so I let her believe it did. Only so she would call me again the next day and the day after.

“I missed our phone calls,” I joked. “It’s been hard without my best friend.”

Her wistful sigh tugged at my heart. “I’m sorry. I should have been a better friend.”

“No, I should have,” I corrected her. “If I had been, I would have seen that Stuart—”

She placed a finger against my mouth before I could finish the sentence. “It led us here. No regrets.”

“No regrets,” I echoed. “Now, eat your breakfast. You’re going to need your strength.”

She giggled. “Are we finally getting to the kinky sex today?”

I studied her seriously. I wasn’t sure she was ready for what I had in mind. Before I could do something stupid, I stood up and turned toward the bathroom.

“If you consider exploring an island ‘kinky sex,’ then sure.”

Then I walked into the bathroom with an obvious hard-on, not missing her delighted cackle.

## Chapter 25

### Willow



**W**e woke up in La Terrenas, a little unknown town in the Dominican Republic in the Pueblo de los Pescadores municipality.

We spent the day hiking, swimming, and shopping—in that order. The water was sapphire blue—I’d never seen anything like it.

For several days, we swam naked under the stars. I loved the colorful houses, blinding seas, mountains, food, and people. We kayaked over water that was so clear it felt like we were in Atlantis. We had sex in secluded coves with his hand muffling my screams, then collected shells to bring back for Sailor and Aurora.

We found a shop that sold more pineapples, and Royce stocked up on them like they were going extinct. My cheeks stained with embarrassment as the salesperson beamed with satisfaction.

Royce’s touch was addictive. Whenever he fucked me, my orgasm hit me from a dozen different places all at once.

But it wasn’t just sex, it was so much more. The way he listened to me, the way he cared for me, and the way he was attuned to me. Whenever we walked the beach or swam in the crystal waters, we talked about anything and everything—my career, his businesses, our goals and dreams, our shared memories. He’d always been a big part of my life, but now, I couldn’t imagine a future without him. Without us, just like this.

“What kind of nursery do you have in mind?”

I held on to his muscular shoulders, blinking water away from my lashes. We’d been swimming for the past thirty minutes, and the pads of my fingers were becoming wrinkly.

“Hmm, a pretty one.”

His lips brushed over my jawline. “I need more details.”

I chuckled. “Honestly, being so early in the pregnancy, I haven’t given it much thought. Maybe green accents if it’s a boy and lavender if it’s a girl.”

He seemed to consider my words for a moment. “How about green regardless of if it’s a boy or a girl?”

My brows scrunched. “Why green?”

He gave me the most beautiful smile. “Because your green eyes glimmer when you’re happy.” He leaned forward, brushing his mouth against mine. “And when you come for me.” My cheeks heated, despite the cool Caribbean waters. “You’ll come for me now, won’t you, baby?”

My nipples instantly hardened, every fiber of my being relishing in his attention.

His hands roamed my body, his fingers hooking under my top, and I vibrated with anticipation. My body pressed harder against him, his skin burning mine even underwater.

“Wrap your legs around my waist.” I did without hesitation, and his palms ran up my legs. My breathing turned erratic, my core throbbing with the need to feel him inside me. He took my lips in a hard kiss, his tongue invading my mouth.

“Royce, someone might see us,” I breathed, grinding against his erection.

“Let them watch, then,” he growled, his fingers coming between my thighs and pushing my bathing suit to the side.

His finger brushed against my clit, and a moan escaped me as he began to circle the bundle of nerves in lazy motions. The image my mind conjured of someone possibly watching us only fueled my desire.

My hands roamed his body hungrily, needing to feel all of him. I shuddered as he thrust his fingers inside me, and he swallowed my whimper. Breaking the kiss, his mouth brushed against my earlobe as he said, “I can feel your greedy cunt clenching my fingers. You’re wishing it was my cock, aren’t you?”

My forehead fell against his shoulder as my breaths turned into small pants, his fingers thrusting inside me. “Yes.”

“Beg for it, wife.” His movements were relentless, his thumb circling my swollen clit, before he abruptly stopped.

“No,” I moaned, shooting him a glare. “Don’t be a bastard.”

He grinned, although his eyes shone with dark promises. “Beg for it.”

“Please.” I was a weak woman. “Please make me come.”

He slid his fingers back inside me, and I tightened my grip around his waist as I lost myself to the sensation. In and out. In and out.

My breathing hitched, ecstasy within reach.

His mouth found my neck, and he licked and nipped. I pushed my hands into his hair, holding on for dear life.

“Look at me,” he growled, and I lifted my head, our eyes locking. The unfiltered desire in them was exhilarating. He honed in on that sweet spot, powering his fingers in and out as one curled inward.

“Oh, fuck... Oh... my... God...” A cry tore through me. I pulled at his hair, my body coiling tight as shudders rippled through me. He continued thrusting his fingers, drawing out my pleasure.

“We’re not done,” he rasped as I melted in his arms. “You’ll give me more.”

The world was spinning, my lungs fighting for air.

“You’re really demanding,” I said, and he answered with a rough kiss. “And greedy,” I added against his lips.

He grinned, his strong hand tracing my thighs.

“That I am, but only when it comes to you.”

Then he showed me exactly how greedy he was.



The next day, we were out on the town, making the most of the Dominican. Royce was sipping rum and I was devouring a plate of Bandera Dominicana, a traditional dish, when his phone rang.

I watched his expression turn black, but whoever was on the line did most of the talking. His demeanor relaxed when he hung up, but my curiosity was piqued.

“Something wrong?”

His gaze flickered to my phone, lying flat on the table. He raked his teeth over his bottom lip before he answered, “We need to turn off our phones.”

I stared at him until he met my eye. “Why?”

Deep in the pit of my stomach, I knew. “Stuart’s calling around, trying to access our location.”

I wasn’t surprised, but I was disappointed. Scared. Without another word, I lifted my phone and powered it off.

“Who gave you the heads-up?”

“Alexei.”

As he paid the bill, I asked, “Where are we going next?”

“Bermuda.”

We were definitely taking the long way home.

We set sail the very same night, and as the soft island lights disappeared from view, I already missed it. There wasn’t a single moment on this island I didn’t love, and I could only hope we’d be back one day—the three of us.



This next island was a slice of paradise. Tropical trees surrounded us. The birds chirped. Waves crashed against the shoreline. The sun shone through large palm fronds, kissing our skin. It was everything I could have wanted and more.

“This is wonderful.” I stepped closer to Royce, taking a deep inhale of his fresh scent. “I didn’t realize how much I needed to stretch my legs.”

“I know how much you love physical exercise,” he remarked, and his teasing tone didn’t escape me.

I swatted his arm gently. “You make it sound like I hate it.”

He chuckled warmly.

“But you don’t love it.” I rolled my eyes, choosing to remain quiet. “I read it’s healthy for a woman to be active while pregnant, but you might not want to start vigorous exercise if it hasn’t already been part of your routine.”

Warmth rushed through me. His admission made me want to jump his bones and kiss him all over. This version of Royce that he kept closed off from the world—the one who went out of his way to read *pregnancy blogs*—was the one that had stolen my heart.

Wait. What?

I tripped and would have face-planted into the dirt if it hadn’t been for Royce’s reflexes. My gaze lowered to his inked arm with the mountain

landscape wrapped around my waist, holding me up, and everything inside me fluttered like this was my first crush.

And, ironically, Royce Ashford was my first crush, but then I grew up and got over it. At least I thought I had.

Jesus Christ.

I'd fallen hopelessly in love with Royce again. My husband. My best friend. My lover. Somewhere in the past few weeks, Royce had burrowed into my life. Once we slept together, he'd insisted we sleep in the same bed, threatening to throw me overboard when I suggested space.

The truth was I couldn't imagine waking up in the morning without him by my side.

"Where on the map are we exactly?" I asked, choosing not to dwell on this revelation.

"Right here." He pointed at the middle of the screen that showed the Atlantic Ocean. "We're only a few miles away from Bermuda."

Once I was steady on my feet, Royce slid his hand into mine, intertwining our fingers, and we continued trekking.

"Oh, does it have a name?"

Royce's gaze roved over the trail and into the surrounding bush, and for the first time, I realized he seemed hyper-vigilant. "It's private, so I'm not sure."

My eyes widened. "Please don't tell me it's your island."

"No, but I'm thinking I might buy it." He raised a brow. "Make him an offer he can't refuse."

"W-what? Who's *he*?"

His expression remained the same. "I think it belongs to Winston's buddy, Asher. The guy I bought the boat from. I like this island, and it'd be a good place to raise a kid."

My brows furrowed. "I don't want to be too far away from my family and friends."

He grinned. "Ditto." When I gave him a confused look, he explained, "I was joking, but I would like to teach Asher a lesson."

I glanced around, marveling at this world where one human owned the entire freaking island.

"How... how does one even buy an island?"

"It's easier than you'd think."



I side-eyed him, poking his shoulder with my free hand. "It's far too remote for us. We've been walking for an hour and we've yet to see a single soul."

A smile broke free across his beautiful lips.

"You're right, wife." *Phew*. While I loved visiting exotic places, I preferred city life. Bouncing between Lisbon and D.C. did that to a girl. "I think we should be close to your family."

"And yours," I reminded him. Royce was close to his siblings, and while they didn't often see eye to eye, they were a unit.

"Huh."

I bumped my shoulder against him playfully. "Just like your brothers, you're an overbearing control freak when it comes to your family. It's an admirable trait."

He gripped my hand, his eyes finding mine. "I'm starting to wonder something."

"What's that?"

"Why didn't I marry you ages ago?"

A strange type of warmth engulfed me, and something about his words and soft touch, even his unreadable features, communicated his meaning. I understood.

"I'm starting to wonder the same thing," I joked. "But I'm glad you're willing to be close to my parents."

"Of course. If my father was half the man yours is, I would have probably spent more time around him."

None of the Ashford brothers dwelled on their difficult relationship with their father, but I knew from Aurora that they blamed him for Kingston's kidnapping. Though, with how deep their disdain ran, there had to be more to it.

"You don't talk about your mom much," I noted softly. In all the years I'd known him, he'd rarely spoken of the late Mrs. Ashford.

"No." The answer was curt, which he must have sensed because he squeezed my hand gently. "There isn't much to say, honestly. She was good to us, loved us unconditionally, but Father demanded a lot of her attention. She made it work, and whatever time she had left over, she tried her best to shower us with it. Byron and Winston saw more of the shit going on between her and our father, so she tried to compensate for that with them. The rest of us were happy to take what we could get."

Being an only child and witnessing my parents' wedded bliss, I couldn't relate, but I understood how hard it would be not to feel slighted.

"Do you hold it against her?"

Royce's brows scrunched. "No, never against her. Against Senator Ashford, absolutely."

"And now he's dead," I whispered softly.

His shoulders tensed. "May he rot in hell."

For the next mile or so, we hiked in silence, both of us lost in our thoughts. Ten years of close friendship and I still felt like there were layers to Royce that I hadn't peeled back.

I opened my mouth to ask him a question when we stopped at the top of the hill and a trickle sounded in the distance. *Water*. Royce pulled me deeper into the forest, and with each step, the rush of water grew louder.

"Is it a waterfall?" I asked in awe, my gaze darting left and right.

"I think so."

Another half a mile and the moment the unobstructed view of the waterfalls appeared, I stopped breathing. They ran between two hills, rushing down off the cliff and into the river.

It was only then that I spotted a mansion at the base of the hill, standing out with its two-story modern architecture. Yet, somehow it fit right in amongst the beautiful greenery.

I gaped at the fairylike setting, unable to peel my gaze away. The river flowed on the left side of the manor, wide and deep enough to accommodate a boat, and disappeared inside a mountain.

"This is just... wow," I whispered.

"I'm glad you like it. Although, I'd like to know what you're doing on my property," an unfamiliar voice came from behind us.

Royce and I whipped around, and my mind blanked. A Greek god stood in front of me. It was the only plausible explanation as I stared at the man with gunmetal-blue eyes and a rugged beard. His blond hair was tied with a black ribbon, pulled away to reveal a harsh but beautiful face. I cleared my throat and averted my eyes before they could dip down his chiseled chest. Instead, my gaze caught on an odd tattoo—a symbol settled in the mouth of a skull—peeking through his white shirt. I'd never seen anything like it.

"Well, well. Asher." I shot my husband a surprised look. He knew this guy? "It seems you used me and my catamaran to transport your goods."

Asher smirked, clearly unimpressed. "Call it payback for saving you."  
His blue eyes flitted back to me. "And your wife's ass."

A growl vibrated in the air, mixing with the thundering waterfalls.

"Mention my wife's ass again and I'll kill you," Royce gritted.

Asher threw his head back and laughed. "You Ashfords should really learn to practice restraint when it comes to your women."

What the hell did that mean?

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## Chapter 26

### Asher



“Well, this feels like *déjà vu*,” I remarked, studying Royce and Willow. “Same threats, different day.”

“Fuck you, Asher. You used me.” I shrugged—he wasn’t totally wrong. I saw an opportunity and I went for it. I also *saved* his ass, so he should be thanking me. “What kind of shit are you smuggling?”

“Don’t worry about it. My men are getting it off the boat as we speak.”

Royce wasn’t pleased with this turn of events at all.

“Off *my* boat.”

“You insisted on buying it,” I replied.

“Exactly,” he gritted. “Which means everything on it is mine.”

“That’s not how the world works.”

“And what if I take it back?” Royce challenged. Judging by the look in his eyes, he’d probably try. He’d be sorely disappointed because the product wasn’t anything he imagined.

“There is nothing you can do with this cargo,” I drawled. “Trust me. It’s not my usual.”

“Well, whatever it is, you care about it, so—”

“The last person who tried to steal from me ended up in a coma,” I said dryly, cutting him off. “Consider it fair warning. I hate to damage that pretty face.”

Royce scoffed, judging by his expression, he wasn’t concerned at all. After all, the fucker thrived on challenges. I’d bet he spent his days in the military with a hard-on.

“Whatever it is, it’s here now. Let’s drop it,” Willow chimed in, trying to calm her husband. “As long as it’s not illegal.”

Royce rubbed a thumb across his bottom lip. “The last person who tried to fuck with *me* ended up castrated.”

*Jesus Christ, and he’s bragging about it.*

My gaze flicked to Willow who paled slightly. I’d seen pictures of what Royce had done to Stuart Harris. It wasn’t a pretty sight. If she’d witnessed it, it was pretty remarkable she agreed to marry him.

“Fuck with me, Royce, and you won’t like the outcome,” I remarked wryly. “If you need money—”

“Why would I need your money?” Damn prick. “Anyway, moving on. Why did you have the boat’s navigation locked to get us here?”

“So you could bring me my shit. Duh.”

“Ummm... what’s going on?” Royce’s new wife watched us, wide-eyed, her head swiveling as she tried to follow our exchange. “I feel like I missed an important piece of conversation here. I thought we were renting the boat, Royce.”

“You were, until you weren’t,” I told her smugly, then extended my hand. “I’m Asher Varangr.”

She hesitantly took my hand and shook it. “Willow Auc—”

“Ashford.” Royce was quick to correct her. I almost expected him to pound on his chest like a gorilla and shout *mine*. Pathetic.

“Well, at least you saved money on initials,” I retorted dryly while Willow flashed her new husband an intimate smile, causing a pang of jealousy to hit me and catching me totally off guard. I’d never been close to anyone, not my mother or my grandfather. The former died before I’d uttered my first word, and the latter only knew how to discipline. The truth was my grandfather was bitter for missing his chance with his *blast from the past*, and he held it against my mother and myself.

“Well, since you’re here, why don’t you join me for a party that I’m hosting,” I said, addressing Royce. “You might remember it as the one your brother Winston usually hosts.”

His eyes flashed in surprise. “When did he stop?”

“When he married Billie.”

A calculated look passed my half-sibling’s expression, and I knew he was caught in a memory. The party always drew the kinkiest guests, and Royce fell into that category.

“What kind of party?” Willow asked curiously. “Is there a dress code?”  
My lips twitched. “There sure is. I’ll let your husband fill you in.”

With that, I urged them forward, bringing my plan one step closer to fruition.

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## Chapter 27

### Royce



“I think the arrest warrant for my wife and me is a bit too much,” I drawled, Byron on the other side of the phone. Willow was taking a shower, so I took advantage of the moment alone and called my brother. She was excited for the party despite the fact I’d warned her it would be scandalous—particularly if it was anything like the ones Winston used to host.

“A bit too much? You castrated the man,” Byron bellowed like a madman over the speaker. Thank fuck he wasn’t in the same room. “His parents found him naked. Stuart almost bled to death. Are you *trying* to put our family under a microscope?”

“When are we not under a microscope?”

“For fuck’s sake, Royce. With the shit that happened with Father, we can’t have people looking into us.”

Ah yes—our brother Winston finally put an end to the great Senator Ashford, and we were all the better for it. But that secret would never leak. The media had always been obsessed with our family, calling us the Billionaire Kings due to the fortune left to us by our mother. If we weren’t careful, they would be sniffing for details about our family twenty-four seven. We’d been holding them at bay for the past few decades, and we’d keep doing it now. Byron, as usual, was making an elephant out of a fly.

“What do you want me to say about Stuart?” I said nonchalantly, flicking a glance to the bathroom door. The shower had just stopped running, which meant Willow would be out any moment. “If anything, I did him and his temper a favor. Hopefully he’ll have better restraint now.”

“Jesus fucking Christ.”

“If you’re about to pray, let me know so I can hang up.” It was probably not the best time to taunt him. He always took everything too seriously. “Just get in touch with our lawyer and let him handle it. This thing with Stuart is being blown out of proportion because of who his parents are. He was the one who put his hands on Willow, and I have the evidence to back it up. I’m not threatened by him or his family in the slightest.”

“I swear to God, if I knew it wouldn’t make Willow sad, I’d murder you right now.”

“Maybe you should consider murdering Stuart’s parents. They’re just as corrupt as Father was.”

“Yeah, let’s go killing everyone on our shit list.”

“I’m on board with it. Let me know what I can do,” I deadpanned. I could hear Byron’s exasperated breath over the line. “Of course, I’d prefer the executions to happen outside the States until the dust settles and this warrant is retracted.”

In light of everything, it’d probably be smart to extend my honeymoon with Willow. Maybe we could head to Venezuela next. I’d have to look up the country’s extradition laws. Fuck it, I’d make it a business trip and pour some money into the economy. Knowing how corrupt the government was currently, they’d gladly keep Willow and me there.

Perfect plan.

“Hold off on the killing spree,” Byron remarked dryly. “The lawyer tells me they have nothing on you.”

I let out a sardonic breath. “I find that hard to believe since I didn’t exactly stay behind to clean up my mess.”

“Well, someone did.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “I bet it was Asher.”

“Who?”

“The fucking pirate.”

“Why would he do that?”

*To get me to transport whatever shit he had stashed on that boat.* The irony was that I scoured it to ensure there wasn’t some fucked-up shit left around and found nothing. The fucker was good.

“No idea,” I told him. I took a sip of my cognac, savoring the burn. “But Willow will be back any minute, so I can’t talk much longer. Just get the warrant taken care of. I’ll sail the seas a bit longer and—”



“Great, now my brother’s becoming a pirate too. Just say *arghhh*.” My brother just cracked a joke. Hell was about to freeze over.

“Arghhh,” I retorted wryly, scratching my chin. “Happy?”

“With you? Not even remotely.”

“Life’s a bitch,” I taunted. Despite my brothers and I not always seeing eye to eye, we had each other’s backs. “I’ll stop in Venezuela and a few South American ports to get some business accomplished.”

“Maybe you should forgo South America. Come back so we can hide you and Willow—”

“No.”

“You’re not being reasonable, brother.”

“Any option that jeopardizes Willow’s freedom is a no-go.”

“Fuck, you’re smitten,” he muttered.

“Look who’s talking.” I shook my head. “You jacked off for six years waiting for Odette to find her way back to you. I’m surprised you didn’t lose function in your cock.”

“Maybe I *should* let them arrest you,” he grumbled.

“Aurora will have your balls.” Our sister was the boss and we all knew it. She said jump, and we asked how high. “What will your pretty wife do then?”

The door opened, and I paused with my drink halfway to my mouth. Willow came out wearing a strapless green dress that Asher must’ve had delivered. I knew not to ask where in God’s name he managed to procure it, but I was looking forward to shredding it to pieces and fucking her brains out.

“As much as this was a pleasure, Byron...” *Not*. “I gotta go. I’ll keep in touch.”

I ended the call before he could say another word and locked my eyes on my wife. Fuck, she was gorgeous. Her auburn waves fell down her back, tempting me to take her right now and fuck her in every possible position.

Willow stepped in front of me, nudging my legs apart so she could stand between them. “Everything okay?”

“Perfect.” No harm in white lies. I wrapped a hand around her waist and pulled her closer to me. My palm came down to her ass, roaming it affectionately.

“Anyone fucked your ass before?”

Her eyes shot to me and she scoffed, turning crimson. “What?”

I smiled smugly. "That's a no."

She swallowed. "It's a no, but why are we having this conversation?"

"I'm going to be your first." I rubbed her butt cheeks. When she gave me a confused look, I added, "I want to be the first to fuck your ass. I should have been your first everything."

She gasped, then took her bottom lip between her teeth. "I've never..." She trailed off, and satisfaction shot its way through my veins. "I don't know that you'd fit. You're quite big."

The arousal in her voice had my dick twitching.

"We'll get you a butt plug." A smile graced her full lips as she came to rest her hands over my shoulders. "Will you be drenched when I fuck your ass?"

"Yes." Her shallow pants poured raw lust through me and my groin tightened. She attempted to regain composure, but it was a moot point. Both of us were too far gone. "You still haven't told me what kind of party this is." Her raspy voice was doing shit to me.

"The kind where people fuck and watch others get fucked." I leaned closer to her, sinking my teeth around one of her nipples through the material. "Oh, baby, no bra?"

Her nails dug into my shoulders, and she thrust her chest into my face.

"It'll give you easier access," she murmured.

"I can't wait to fuck you like a good girl while others watch, wishing they were me."

She pulled back and gulped a few breaths. Her eyes were etched with worry. "R-Royce..."

The need to ravage her slowly dissipated into worry. "If you don't want that—"

"I want it all with you," she said in a soft voice. "I just need to know that you'll..." She paused, searching for the right words. "That it'll be just you touching me."

"Nobody will touch you but me." The possession in my voice was like a volcano ready to erupt, but it must have been the reassurance she needed. She was fucking mine. And always would be. Just because I didn't murder Stuart, it didn't mean I wouldn't kill anyone who dared touch my wife. "Would you like a preview?"

She shuddered, her arousal drifting into the air between us.

"Yes, please."

I stood up, spun her around, and bent her over the bed. She glanced over her shoulder as I bunched her dress around her waist. My palm snaked between her legs, yanking her panties off.

She giggled. “Well, those lasted all of two minutes.”

My lips brushed against her ear, nibbling on her earlobe, and she moaned.

“I’m going to fuck you,” I grunted. “You’re not going to wash off afterward. I want you walking around with my cum inside you, leaking down her inner thighs.” I slapped her pussy. “Understood?”

She yelped in surprise. “What—”

“That’s for not acknowledging me.” I slapped her pussy again. “Now, what are you going to do after I fuck you?”

“I’m going to walk around with your cum trailing down my legs,” she moaned, bringing a hand between her legs.

Another slap against her swollen pussy.

“Do not touch yourself.” My palm landed on her pussy again with a loud slap, her wetness making obscene noises. “And this is for making me wait, my beautiful wife.”

“It was a quick shower,” she protested as I slid my hard cock along her drenched folds, poised at her entrance. I brought my hand around to her hip, my fingers digging into her flesh while the other gripped her throat.

“Not quick enough.” I slammed into her, and she let out a whimpering sob.

I stilled, feeling her walls close around my length.

Willow looked over her shoulder with a huff and uttered, “Don’t you fucking stop now.” My lips curved in satisfaction.

Letting loose, I slammed into her tight heat. She moaned; I grunted. I fucked her with a savage-like fury, turning her into a scrambled mess. In and out. Harder and faster, each hard thrust bringing me closer to nirvana.

The tingles at the base of my spine began to climb as I thrust deeper and faster, until she came apart around me, her inner muscles clenching around my cock.

I followed her right over the edge, coming apart in the most powerful orgasm I’d ever experienced.



We exited our bedroom on the top floor of Asher's mansion. Our steps were quieted by the plush rugs. The walls were covered in dark paneling, giving the house an isolated feeling. While it had modern amenities, its ambiance gave the impression of being stuck in the Middle Ages.

Kind of like Asher.

Something about him rubbed me the wrong way, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

"Holy shit," Willow whispered, and I followed her gaze over the rail toward the bottom of the stairs, where the white marble floor was dusted with red rose petals.

"Jesus, it looks like blood," I muttered. "Some fucked-up sacrifice ritual."

She clucked her tongue at me, squeezing my hand. "Only you would find something wrong with this picture," she reprimanded with a giggle, pointing to a row of red candles. "I think it's kind of romantic."

"Dracula-themed you mean." I grinned when she shot me a warning look. "We'll see what you think when this party's in full swing."

Her cheeks flushed, probably letting her imagination run wild. The truth was she probably wasn't even scratching the surface.

We were just about to reach the stairs when a photo caught my eye and I stopped, my brows scrunching. It was of a young woman, white-blonde curls and sad blue eyes holding a baby in her arms.

"What is it?" Willow asked, studying the photo. "You know her?"

"She looks like..." No way, it couldn't be. Willow squeezed my hand, urging me to finish my thought. "She looks like a housekeeper who worked for our family years and years ago. But it couldn't be."

"Why not?"

I dug my cell from my pocket. "Because she died. She never had a baby."

"Maybe she adopted," Willow offered. Except, my instinct warned me it was something else. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to snap a photo of it and send it to Byron. He was older when she was around. He'll recognize her." With a *whoosh*, the photo was on its way to my brother. Before I even had a chance to put my cell away, a text came back.

Why are you sending me photos of our maid? I don't want my wife to think I have eyes for anyone but her.

I typed a message back.

Delete the message, then.

His reply was instant.

You're a dick. Who's the baby?

"So it is her," Willow breathed. "What an odd coincidence."

"Isn't it?" I agreed.

"Or maybe I set it up so you could finally learn the truth." Asher's voice came from behind us—the fucking creep—and Willow whimpered, jumping closer to me. This pirate would have to learn not to sneak up on my wife or he'd find himself in the bottom of the sea.

Slowly turning around, we came face-to-face with him. He stood with a glass of rum in his hand, his freakishly blue eyes flickering to the photo.

"Who's the baby in the photo?" I asked, holding my breath for what I already knew.

Tension clicked in the air, and we stared each other down.

"I am." I waited, knowing he wasn't done dropping bombs. "And Senator Ashford is... pardon, *was* my father."

The silence stretched so long I worried that if I broke it, I'd cause irrevocable damage.

"Holy shit." Willow ended up being the one to cut through it. "Your father sure got around."

That he did, and for some reason, the old man never learned to use a fucking condom.

## Chapter 28

### Willow



For a moment, I was too stunned to process any of it, but then I had to blurt the first stupid thing that came to mind.

*Your father sure got around?* I was such an idiot.

I instantly regretted the words. I should have shown some compassion, or at least waited to see how Royce would take the news.

“Does Winston know?” Royce demanded, his expression neutral, but he wasn’t fooling me. There was an undercurrent of merciless rage in him, the visible tic in his jaw telling me he was *pissed*.

Asher shoved the hand that wasn’t holding the rum into his suit pocket, an air of indifference swirling around him. Yet, I got the distinct feeling the opposite was true.

“Not that I owe you any explanation, but no. He does not.” Fury emanated off him in waves, but to his credit, he kept a lid on it.

I swallowed, but neither man paid any attention to me. Their gazes were locked in a silent battle of wills.

“And how long have you fucking known?” Royce hissed.

Asher’s expression remained neutral. “I don’t answer to you—we’ve been over this.” He took a casual sip of his drink, then placed it on the table next to him. “But in case you haven’t noticed, my name is Asher. It was the closest she could come to giving me the name *your* father denied us. Asher... Ashford.” He waved a hand in a *Let’s go, catch up* kind of gesture.

“Where is your mother now?” Royce growled. “I want to know why she was spreading her legs for my father under my mother’s roof. Has she no shame?”

My eyes widened, flying between the two men. Royce was easygoing and less intense than his brothers. Until he got pissed off. Then he let loose the wrath he had bottled up in his gorgeous body.

Asher's big body slammed into my husband's, making the frames behind them rattle from the impact. I squealed, trying to insert myself between them, and pushed at Asher's chest. The man was pure muscle.

"Stop it, both of you," I hissed. "Or you'll have a pregnant psycho on your hands."

The threat seemed to work because they straightened up, Asher taking a step back and putting some distance between them.

"Ever occurred to you that maybe my mother had no choice?" Asher finally said. "Your father was a pig."

The meaning behind his words sunk in, and I could feel Royce's body burn with that familiar anger he reserved for his father.

I cleared my throat, squaring my shoulders before my husband could do something he'd regret.

"Well, technically, Asher, he's *your* father too." His eyes twitched, but I didn't back down. I turned to Royce, tugging on his arm. "And you, my dear husband, can't blame Asher for who his parents are. He had no control over any of it."

They seemed unmoved, but at least the temperature had somewhat eased. I didn't want to be caught in the crossfire of whatever was developing here, but I also didn't want to pretend it wasn't my problem. Just like Royce always had my back, I was determined to have his.

"Asher, where is your mother?"

"She died," he answered flatly. "Suicide."

I bit my lip, sorrow washing over me. It was another example of how lucky I was. My parents were... well, normal. Yes, we'd had our ups and downs, but our relationship didn't hold a candle to the Ashford family drama.

"I'm sorry," I murmured.

"I'm sorry too," Royce murmured, and when I chanced a glance at him, I saw genuine remorse floating in his eyes. Both men had lost their mothers—I could only hope that maybe one day they'd bond over it. "I am curious about one thing."

"What's that?" Asher asked.

“Why are you working as a captain for Amon Leone? It’s obvious you’re loaded,” Royce said, swiftly changing the subject. Knowing Royce, he’d wait to explore this newfound half-sibling relationship until he spoke to Aurora and his brothers.

“I’m not at liberty to disclose that,” Asher answered.

Royce shot him a disapproving glance, but I bumped my shoulder against him, giving him a pointed look. He couldn’t exactly blame Asher for being distrustful. I could imagine trust was hard to come by when you grew up watching your father carry on living his privileged life, appearing like father of the year.

“Well, if you ever need help, you got my number,” Royce said reluctantly. “Although, the next time you set me up to transport your illegal goods, I’ll have to shoot you.”

And just like that, the tension eased up.



Taking my hand from the crook of his arm, Royce led me down the elaborate staircase. A tender, sorrowful Chopin melody filled the air, the piano notes slowing down, then speeding up only to slow down again, but it was all just background noise as I focused on the man at my side.

“You okay?” I whispered under my breath, throwing a look over my shoulder to ensure we were alone. Asher disappeared after receiving a call, and we were steadily making our way toward this... *immersive* party. “If you want, we can leave.”

“Fuck no. The guy had us smuggling goods for him. The least he can do is provide us with a good time.” He bent his head, his mouth brushing against my ear. “Besides, I’m curious to see your reaction.”

My stomach dipped at the dark gleam in his eyes, the very same one he wore when he fucked me, and a small burst of excitement washed over me.

“Willow, if you keep looking at me that way, we’ll never make it to the party.”

I laughed, bumping my shoulder with his. “Sorry, I should try to keep my naughty thoughts off my face.”

“Want me to do naughty things to you, wife?” he drawled, the smooth timbre of his voice sending a warm shiver down my spine. Combined with



the cum I could feel trickling from my core, tonight was shaping up to be a long night.

"If I knew you were this insatiable, I would have thought twice about marrying you," I teased, lying through my teeth, but suddenly his expression turned serious and his steps halted.

"Am I being... too much?"

I shot him a surprised look, my humor evaporating. His expression was guarded, but vulnerability shone through, and suddenly, I saw him a little clearer. Saw things I'd missed over the last decade. I took his big, veiny hands into mine and squeezed.

"I was teasing. You could never be too much, Royce," I said, locking eyes with him. "You're just enough. I've had a crush on you for years. Since high school, actually."

His lips lifted. "I was too old for you."

"Our age difference hasn't changed."

"But we have."

"We've changed." I nodded. "But there's one thing I want you to know." He stilled, waiting for me to continue. "There isn't a single part of you that I don't love. You're perfect the way you are," I breathed, emotions suffocating me. "You've always been perfect."

"I'm not," he rasped, emotions swirling behind those dark eyes.

"You are to me." He cupped my face, his rough palms gentle, and he bent his head down to brush the tip of his nose against mine. I breathed a sigh, loving his closeness. "I don't want you to ever hold back with me, Royce," I told him seriously, pressing my lips to his and hoping I could make him understand without having to say it outright. "I want you to do it *all* with me."

He looked at me with reverence and his sensual masculinity set flame to my blood like a match in gasoline.

"I love you, baby." My heart took flight and I feared it'd never come back to earth. I felt light as a feather, watching his dark eyes sparkle and dance. Memories spanning back to the first time we kissed flashed through my mind, and I sighed when he said, "You and this baby are mine. It took me too long to see it, but now, I'll shout it from the rooftops. Nothing will keep us apart anymore. You and I, baby, we've been a decade in the making."

Tears blurred my vision as I lifted on my toes and pressed a kiss to his mouth.

“Do you mean it?” I whispered, so many feelings suffocating me. He nodded while I struggled with my roller coaster of emotions. “Please be sure.” My voice trembled. “I can’t be a footnote in your life, Royce. I want it all.”

His nose brushed against mine, his eyes darkening into a burning coal.

“Willow, I mean every word. I love you and I want to do it all with you. With you and only you.”

My heart ricocheted in my chest as the butterflies in my stomach fluttered wildly. “Oh, Royce, I love you too.”

His hand tightened around my waist. “You do?”

“I never got over you.” Everything about this man was perfect. “It took you sweeping in like Prince Charming for me to understand. To realize it was you all along who held my heart and why I couldn’t find happiness elsewhere.”

Things would have been simpler if I had, but life had a way of working itself out.

A door opened somewhere in the distance, and the thundering of the waterfall drifted through the air, mixing with the melodies of Chopin. It was the reminder we needed—we had a party to get to.

I took a step, my shoe slipping off, but before I could fix it, Royce was down on his knees, sliding the shoe back on my foot.

“Cinderella was always my favorite fairy tale,” I half-teased.

A burst of laughter from the ballroom shattered through the air, and he straightened to his full height.

“Mine too,” he whispered against my ear. “I always wanted my own Cinderella and now I got you.”

The whisper was full of velvet promises, making my nipples tighten into hard, aching points. Blood roared in my ears and drowned out everything else except my heartbeats. We started walking again, my hand back in the crook of Royce’s elbow while an electric current ran through my veins.

“This isn’t the most romantic place to have admitted my love for you,” he remarked wryly, glaring in the direction of the party.

I let out a strangled laugh, unable to suppress the happiness glowing in my chest. “It was perfect.” I let my eyes soften as I spoke that word again.

His heated gaze lingered on me. This was real. *He* was real, and he was all mine. No matter what.

“How did I get so fucking lucky?” There was a roughness to his voice, and I got the sense we were feeling the same emotions.

“I could ask you the same question,” I said with a smile. His mouth skimmed over my cheeks, only to return to the corner of my lips.

“You know, I don’t regret our kiss ten years ago. It’s still the only kiss that’s ever mattered to me.” My eyes widened at his proclamation before a flush rose over my cheeks. “I only regret not making you mine sooner.”

I swallowed past the knot of emotion in my throat as a sudden feeling of apprehension washed over me. I placed a hand over my stomach and said, “What about my baby, Royce? Won’t it bother you that I—”

Before I could say anything else, he nipped my bottom lip. *Hard.*

“*Our* baby,” he corrected me. “We’ll raise the baby together.”

“What about Stuart?”

His hand came to cover mine, rubbing affectionately. His soft smile spread through me like honey. “I’ll make sure our baby boy or girl is safe.”

His answer made me giddy, and his willingness to do this for me—with me—sent a current of want through me. Family came in all shapes and sizes, and ours would be no different.

It was pointless to think about Stuart and what Royce did to him—the mere thought had me wincing—but the fact of the matter was that my husband was overprotective, hot-tempered, and vengeful. I’d always loved and accepted those things about him.

“Now, show me to this kinky party, I want to see what it’s all about,” I teased him softly. “And then you can take me back to our boat and show me everything you like.”

## Chapter 29

### Willow



When we finally made it down the stairs, a butler waited for us with two glasses of champagne. We opted not to take it—I was pregnant and Royce wasn't a champagne kind of guy.

"Right this way," he announced ceremoniously, a double mahogany door swinging open behind him to reveal a ballroom spilling over with men and women, some dressed in silks and others in lingerie.

A chandelier hung from the high ceiling, its glimmer throwing shadows against black-and-crimson-painted walls. Elegant velvet drapes hung over the windows, ensuring privacy. Not that anyone would be peering through the windows on this private island, but the effect had been achieved. The red-accented room was dripping in sin.

There was a dance floor in the center and people swayed to classical music courtesy of the string quartet.

But that wasn't what struck me as curious. It was seeing some men and women dance so freely wearing nothing but their undergarments.

"Please tell me we aren't stripping naked and dancing," I murmured, mesmerized and slightly horrified by the whole scene. I turned my head to look at him. "Is that your kink?"

"That's definitely not my jam," he said, color humoring his voice, then he gestured politely for me to walk through the doors, ever the gentleman.

Heat flushed through me as we moved across the marble floor and glances were thrown our way. Some seemed to recognize Royce, flashing him a smile and waving. Others just leered at us, whispering among themselves.

“Did I miss something?” I muttered under my breath, the awareness raising the hairs on the back of my neck. “Are they gossiping about us?”

“They’re just admiring my beautiful wife.” His hand wrapped around my waist, pulling me closer. “At how lucky I am.”

I pretended to think about it, although a small smile played at my lips.

“No, I don’t think that’s it.” The atmosphere thickened, hushed whispers buzzing around us. My gaze flicked around the room and found all eyes on us. It felt like being watched by a pack of wolves. “Suddenly I feel like prey.”

“You’re my prey,” he stated, and a shudder ripped through me.

“Should I start running? You can fuck me when you catch up,” I half-joked breathlessly. His eyes flared with such carnal pleasure that if he did ask me to run, I’d say how fast.

A waiter appeared with a tray, breaking the moment, and Royce handed me a glass of water, picking up a glass of bourbon for himself.

“Don’t worry, nobody will approach us. They have more bark than bite,” he assured confidently.

I snorted, side-eyeing him as he smiled around the rim of his glass.

There was a VIP section to the far side of the room and he led us toward it. Once we got closer, I saw it was separated by a glass window. The opulent marble floors melted from black to white, and a plush chenille couch and loveseat sat in the center. In the corner, just past the table and shag rug, a fireplace crackled, making it the ideal cozy setup. I felt my shoulders drop from my ears instantly, relaxing with each step.

“Let’s enjoy our privacy here,” Royce said, and he flipped on a switch, shutting the door behind us.

“Definitely better than out there,” I agreed with a content sigh, taking a seat. “So, Winston used to host these?” He nodded. “How did I not know that?”

He chuckled. “Why would we tell our little sister and her friends about shit like that?”

I rolled my eyes. “Kind of a double standard.”

“It was the safest and most responsible option for everyone.” I gave him a confused look, and amusement dashed through his eyes. “We’d have killed anyone who dared even look your way.”

“You mean Aurora’s way,” I corrected him.

“No, I mean all three of you,” he stated. “And I would have personally scalped anyone who looked *your* way.”

“Oh, Royce. You always know the sweetest things to say.”

“That’s why you love me.” His gaze roamed over my face before settling on my eyes. “If at any point tonight you want to leave, tell me. I want to make sure you’re comfortable.”

“I want to do this, whatever *this* is. As long as we’re doing it together.” I took his hand in mine. “I’m excited.”

“Fuck, you make me so hard,” he whispered, his voice dipping low as he took a seat next to me. “And so fucking happy.”

His words filled me with a dark craving, the kind I’d never experienced with any of my past partners. Unbeknownst to me, my body had been waiting for him all along.

I surveyed the ballroom from the privacy of our room. Everything was muffled and slightly out of focus, giving us an additional layer of privacy. My husband’s hand came to rest on my thigh, his heat seeping into me and ramping up my sex drive.

Then suddenly the lights dimmed and the dance floor emptied out, and my gaze flew to it.

*Holy shit.*

## Chapter 30

### Willow



Out of thin air, at least it seemed that way, a St. Andrew's cross appeared in the middle of the dance floor.

Two men in suits and a blonde woman in a white see-through sundress came to stand in front of it, binding her wrists to the cross, and I gasped.

Unable to tear my gaze away from the trio, I watched the two men touch her like their lives depended on it as she writhed against the cross while her wrists remained bound. Her skirt was bunched around her waist, her pussy on display for all to see. Her shoulder straps slid off, exposing her breasts and her perky nipples. She arched and bucked against the restraints. The expression on her face was that of pure bliss as the men's hands explored her body, hungry and rough.

The blood in my veins burned like an inferno while my skin sizzled with need. I couldn't breathe, the air too thick, my lungs too tight. In one thrust, one of the men entered her from the front and the other from behind, filling both her holes. The woman's loud moan could be heard through the glass and over the roaring fire.

My mouth went dry as I watched her. Her moans became piercing, I heard them loud and clear. One of the men wrapped his hand around her neck while the other pinched her nipples, her breathy whimper traveling through the glass.

My own nipples tightened painfully.

"Are you enjoying the show?" Royce's voice startled me and I whimpered, squeezing my thighs together.

“Yes,” I breathed, my heart racing. A relieved smile broke on his face, squeezing his hand on my thigh. “Do you do this... watch others have sex... all the time?”

His gaze dipped down my body until it settled on my green nail polish. “I do.”

Suddenly I felt parched and my tongue swept over my bottom lip. “Are they always strangers? Or people you—” *Fucked.*

I hated the idea of any woman here having felt his hands or his lips. Shit, why was I jealous? It wasn’t like we were together then.

And yet.

His gaze rose to mine and there were so many naughty promises in them.

“Whenever I frequented parties like this, I imagined you with me.”

Excitement fluttered inside me. “Y-you want to watch someone else... fuck me?”

Sure, I was adventurous and was up for trying anything at least once, but this was different. Before I could say anything else, he growled, “I already told you, if any man dares come near you with their dick, I’ll slice it off and feed it to them.”

I sighed in relief, then smiled. “You want someone to watch *us*, then?”

He was up and out of his seat before I could blink. “I want the fuckers to see that the most beautiful woman is with me and know they can’t have her.”

Another large couch, right in front of the glass wall that illuminated the room, would allow everyone outside to watch.

He sat on the side of the sectional, facing me, and I sensed a few eyes on us already.

“It’s like we’re on display... Literally,” I murmured quietly.

He angled his head. “Does it make you uncomfortable?”

“No,” I admitted, my cheeks heating. My gaze fell down to my nonexistent bump, and I shifted uncomfortably. “It’s just—”

“It’s just what?” he urged, taking my chin between strong fingers that now I knew could bring me mind-numbing pleasure. It was something that would be impossible to forget.

“I don’t know,” I muttered.

“You do know.”



My hand came to my stomach, to where new life was slowly growing inside me. "My body isn't what it used to be."

"It isn't," he agreed, my heart sinking. "Your body is even more beautiful." His magnetic eyes found mine, but I gave him a dubious look. "It's the reason they are looking. Every man in this place wants you."

I sucked in a breath, my sensitive nipples pushing against the sheer material of my dress and a shudder rolled through me, arousal pooling between my thighs and the throbbing ache pulsing with need. I crossed my legs, a feeble attempt to get myself together.

His gaze skated down my body like he was aware of the impact his words had on my body. There was an electric current running between us, and the sparks increased when he used a finger to nudge me to uncross my legs.

I kept my knees side by side, pressing my thighs together beneath my skirt, but Royce wouldn't have it. Each hand on my inner thighs, he spread them open.

"My woman's pussy is wet," he growled, sitting back and relaxing in his seat. "Show me and everyone watching us how turned on you are."

Thoughts vaporized in my brain for a moment. I inhaled a shuddering breath, then tore my gaze away from him, checking to see if anyone was looking at us through the glass window. As I scanned the room, there were more than a few eyes on us.

A light pinch to my thigh had me yelping and my gaze flew back to Royce. "Ouch."

"I said I want to see your bare pussy. I'm hungry." More heat poured into my body, and every fiber of me liquified under his watchful stare and filthy words. With trembling fingers, I opened my legs wide, while power and hunger battled in his eyes. "Good girl, now spread the lips open."

I leaned back on one arm and spread my knees, my heels resting on the edge of the couch, and did as he commanded.

His gaze locked on my pussy, and with each passing second that I was bare to him—and anyone else watching—more arousal pooled at my core, trickling down my inner thighs.

I meant to tease him, but my voice came out too husky. "If you're hungry, what are you waiting for?"

His gaze flicked to mine, his hand on the back of the couch curling into a loose fist. A raw hunger flared in his eyes, pleased with my boldness.

“Do you want that?” he asked. “For me to eat your pussy and fuck you while everyone watches?”

Royce’s eyes were focused on me, promising to give me whatever I wanted.

“Yes,” I blurted immediately, goose bumps breaking over my skin. As long as Royce was the only one touching me, I wanted to try it all with him.

His smile sent blood rushing through my veins and bubbling with anticipation. He stood up and leaned forward, taking my hand.

“It’s important you know you can stop this whenever you want.” His fingers laced with mine, and he studied me as he said the next words. “I’ll give you pleasure, pain, euphoria. But remember, you’re always in control.” His gaze returned to his fingertips tracing my hand. “The only way this can work is if we trust each other.”

I filled my lungs with air as I considered what he’d said and how to respond. I squeezed his hand and met his darkness.

“There’s nobody I trust more than you, Royce. Whatever your kink... I’m game.” I gave him a lopsided smile. “But for the love of all that’s holy, fuck me already.”

Royce snapped.

One moment I was seated, and the next my palms were pressed against the glass window, and he bent me over with my ass in the air.

## Chapter 31

### Royce



**M**y cock strained against her bare ass and I paused, desperately attempting to regain some resemblance of self-control before I fucked her like a madman for all to see.

She ground against my cock and rasped in a hoarse voice, “Please, husband, fuck me. Hard.”

My control shattered. Bending her over, her palms braced against the glass, my hands pushed her dress up. I pressed my body against hers, my cock pushing against the soft curve of her ass. Pressing my lips to her delicate neck, I enjoyed the feel of her racing pulse.

Licking her collarbone, I brought my palms to her round ass and whispered, “Ready, wife?”

She glanced over her shoulder, eyes connecting with mine, and a small whimper escaped her.

“Y-yes.” Her red lips parted in an O shape, and her eyes hazed with lust.

This woman—my wife—was mine. Her breasts. Her ass. Her pussy. All fucking mine. I reached around and parted her thighs, sliding my finger past her folds. She was soaked. So fucking wet that my fingers were drenched within seconds.

She was intoxicating, like a drug that never left your system.

I pushed in deeper, and her pussy clenched around my fingers. Her head fell backward, watching me over her shoulder through heavy eyelids, and her cheeks flushed. With my free hand, I fisted her hair and tugged it back, aware others from the party were watching. They could barely see us

though. Only our silhouettes would be visible with how I'd dimmed the lights.

Her pussy strangled my fingers, eager for more as I worked her up. Her moans grew louder, her ass pushing against me.

Then, without warning, I retreated my fingers and brought them to her mouth. Her lips parted and she sucked them clean. Fucking *beautiful*.

Still gripping her hair with one hand, I slid my rock-hard cock along her folds, then slammed into her. She was tight, her walls closing around my cock like a vise.

Her moans vibrated straight to my chest as I fucked her hard. She felt like heaven. One that I had no right to but was grateful for. What remained of my control disintegrated as I fucked her relentlessly. She matched each one of my thrusts with a whimper.

Worried I'd break her and aware that pregnancy might make her sensitive, I forced myself to ease up, brushing kisses along her shoulders and loosening my hold in her hair.

"More," she whimpered, then gulped audibly, her throat working hard. I shouldn't have been surprised—Willow was not the type to be underestimated—but I still found myself chuckling.

Happy to oblige, I picked up my pace as I pounded into her. Her soft moans turned into gasping, urgent cries. She was close. I felt it as if it were my own orgasm. I turned her head another inch so I could be the one to see her face as she shattered with pleasure.

Her green eyes glazed with desire and her mouth parted as I fucked her faster and deeper. With a final cry, I felt her fall apart, her pussy milking me for all I had.

A shudder rippled down my spine and I followed her over the edge. The most powerful orgasm of my life cut through me and I blew my load right into her tight pussy. *Fuck. Me.*

Her body slumped back into me, seeking my comfort. I turned her toward me, running my hands along her thighs and her hips and her shoulders, and took her mouth in a searing kiss. She was going to be the death of me.

## Chapter 32

### Willow



**S**ex with Royce was explosive. Beautiful, thrilling, and each time better than the last.

My whole body was pressed against the glass while my muscles quivered, and I suspected my husband wasn't done with me. He peppered soft kisses against my nape, his hands roaming my body, smoothing over each plane and crevice until coming to land on my stomach.

"Too rough?"

"Perfect," I murmured, meeting his eyes. I was glad he was still supporting most of my weight with how sluggish and shaky my limbs were.

"I love you so fucking much," he murmured against my ear, and heat shot straight to my core, desire fluttering through me. He just fucked the living daylights out of me, and I was already ready for round two.

Royce straightened up and slid out of me, then pushed my dress down so I was decent again.

He circled his arms around me, bringing us chest to chest, and I sighed into him. The sex was wonderful, and I wasn't lying when I told him how rough I liked it, but his aftercare was like a soothing balm.

He used a hand to turn my head, sealing his mouth over mine. His tongue pushed inside, and I swallowed his moan.

"Let's go back to the boat first thing in the morning," he murmured. "I want you all to myself again."

I slipped my hand into his, our fingers interlocking. "Okay."

"Ready for bed?"

I nodded, and we made our way out of the room. His arm draped over my shoulder, and I focused on him as we walked across the polished floors, trying not to trip over my heels. I felt Royce's body tense next to me, and I flicked a curious look to his face to find him staring straight ahead.

I followed his eyes and gasped with disbelief. Stuart's parents were here, standing barely five feet in front of us. Mrs. Harris held her hands on his hips while Mr. Harris leered at me. Goose bumps skated across my arms as I watched his eyes darken and his tongue dart over his lips.

"Willow." Stuart's mother was quick to greet me with a sour expression while my mind reeled with the possibility that these two might have watched Royce and me. The mere idea had bile rising in my throat.

"Mrs. Ashford to you," Royce corrected her, my good mood quickly fading at the sight of Stuart's parents.

"That's impossible," Mr. Harris protested with an even mixture of disbelief and offense.

"I assure you that it isn't." Royce got into his face. "What the fuck are you doing here? This is an exclusive party."

Maybe they were following us and would drag us back to answer for Royce's violence.

"I have connections." A snake-like smile spread across Mr. Harris's face. "And you two have reached your dead end."

"What do you mean?" I asked, my fingernails digging into my husband's forearm as I clutched at him.

"If I knew you two would be here, I would have brought the police." Mr. Harris attempted to grab my arm and Royce shoved him away, causing the old man to stumble. He glared at Royce with a murderous look. "You two are criminals."

"And your son's a woman beater," Royce said easily while the vein in his temple throbbed. He was a ticking bomb. "Push me and I'll ensure every single newspaper has a trending story on the Harris family tomorrow with a special section covering Stuart as a woman beater." Their faces tightened, and Royce continued, "You're bottom feeders, and corrupt as fuck, but you should be smart enough to recognize a bigger threat. *Me*."

That shut them up, but only temporarily, the vicious strenuous current stealing all the oxygen in the room. Mrs. Harris broke the silence.

"Willow is pregnant with Stuart's—" Her voice faltered as temperatures plummeted and tension spiked.

“And?” Royce’s expression hardened. “Did you think that meant she was willing to take your son’s abuse? He showed his true colors, and Willow made her choice. Now what the fuck are you doing here?”

Mrs. Harris jerked back as if he’d slapped her across the face. “Stuart isn’t abusive.”

Royce scoffed. “Tell that to the women he’s hurt.” His eyes flicked to Mr. Harris. “Or your husband. Certain tendencies run in the family, don’t they? Where do you think all those big checks you keep signing are going? Charity?”

I was certain there wasn’t a single intelligent thought rattling in this woman’s head. Either that, or she was willfully blind not to see that her son had serious issues and that her husband was a scumbag.

I watched an oily smile spread across Mr. Harris’s face, his bald head shining even under the dim lights.

“I swear to God if he gets anywhere near me, I’m going to lose my shit,” I muttered under my breath, stepping closer to Royce.

Stuart’s father was in his late sixties, but the work he’d had done made him look twenty years younger, albeit shiny and plastic. And his wife was no different. It would seem they were both desperate to hold on to their youth, which might explain why they were the oldest people at this party.

“I’ll be making a citizen’s arrest,” Mr. Harris purred, and winked at me. A shudder of disgust snaked down my spine. The man had some balls, especially knowing what Royce was capable of.

My brow furrowed as his words sunk in. What the fuck did he mean by that?

“Eyes off my wife, Congressman, or I’ll skin you alive,” Royce hissed as fury emanated off him. “And you haven’t answered my question—what the fuck are you two doing here?”

“Will you do to him what you did to my son?” Mrs. Harris screeched, drawing more attention our way. “Thankfully, he had enough sense to follow our advice and impregnate this one. At least not *all* is wasted.”

“Wh-what?” I asked, confusion swirling inside me as her words sunk in. Royce stilled next to me.

“Say that again.” His tone was calm, but an arctic chill breathed from him.

I flicked my eyes to him, but he was laser-focused. The building could go up in flames and he still wouldn’t pull his eyes away from the threat

before him. This was the Royce who beat up the boy who tried to assault me in college. The very same who evoked a campus-wide “no touching” rule during my college years.

He took a step forward, towering over Mrs. Harris.

“You better start explaining.” He wrapped his hand around her neck, fury coming off him in waves. “Before I castrate your husband and gut you alive.”

I grabbed his forearm, my fingers digging into his inked flesh.

“Royce,” I murmured anxiously, my eyes darting around the room. I spotted Asher storming our way, uncaring of people stumbling to the side as he parted the crowd like the Red Sea.

“What is going on here?” Asher demanded, his expression furious.

“Royce, let her go,” I hissed. “She’s just a messed-up old woman.”

Asher’s eyes darted to me and I threw a hand up in the air. He exhaled and turned to Royce.

“Release her, Royce,” Asher said calmly. “I’ll have them thrown out and ensure my secretary gets them removed from the invite list.” His eyes met mine. “Who the fuck are they?”

“My ex-fiancé’s parents.” Surprise flickered in his gunmetal eyes. It was clear that Asher didn’t concern himself with details of his parties.

“These fuckers were just about to tell me what they did to Willow,” Royce hissed. He took a step closer and wrapped his hand around Mr. Harris’s throat. “Start explaining, or I swear to God, someone’s dying tonight.”

“He got her pregnant,” he croaked, coughing and clawing at his hand. “He made holes in the condoms.”

“*He?*” I repeated, finally finding my voice.

“Stuart got you pregnant on purpose,” Royce gritted, and I blinked in shock.

Mrs. Harris attempted to step in, but Asher held his arm out and kept her back. I fought to breathe as I struggled to comprehend it.

“Why?” I whispered.

Mrs. Harris’s lips pressed into a thin line. “It was a clause in the inheritance.”

“What inheritance?”

“My father’s,” she admitted. “The legacy had to continue.”

Apparently, I overlooked how fucking crazy my ex-fiancé’s family was.



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## Chapter 33

### Royce



**I**t was past midnight and Willow was sound asleep when I started tapping away on my phone. A FaceTime call lit up the screen a minute later, and I took it to mean my brothers had received my messages to our group chat.

I slid out of bed, grabbed my knife from under the pillow, and walked into the bathroom, leaving the door cracked so I could keep an eye on my sleeping wife.

“You can’t be serious?” Byron’s greeting wasn’t surprising. His jaw pulsed and I could see a storm brewing in his eyes even through the screen. “That fucking asshole had another kid.”

Winston and Alessio’s face appeared next.

“Glad to hear I won’t be the only bastard son from now on,” Alessio remarked dryly.

“Father really took the Biblical meaning of ‘go forth and multiply’ literally,” Winston said just as the phone buzzed with Kingston’s incoming message.

Don’t give a shit about Father’s offspring.

Typical Kingston.

“I guess Kingston won’t be joining us for this discussion,” Winston stated wryly.

“Forget Kingston for now,” I snapped. “Aren’t you pissed off he’s your friend and never thought to say anything? He was your *best man*, for fuck’s sake,” I muttered.

“Maybe he’s been biding his time. Or he didn’t know how to approach it. We’re not exactly the most welcoming group of people.” Winston shrugged, unbothered. Not much got to him since he’d finally got his wife back. “Besides, discovering our half-siblings after Alessio and Davina, I wouldn’t be surprised there were more out there.”

Davina was our half-sister who married Liam Brennan, an Irish mobster, but she mainly kept to herself.

“It’s a hard pill to swallow,” agreed Alessio. “I don’t blame him for keeping it to himself.”

“How long has he known?” Byron asked.

“I don’t know.” I flicked a glance through the cracked door. Willow was still sound asleep. “But there’s more.” I sighed and set the knife down on the counter before I continued. “I ran into Stuart’s parents.”

“At Asher’s house?” Alessio’s brows scrunched as he tried to process it. “Why would they be there? Was it a setup?”

I smiled. “Apparently they’re into the parties. They’ve come to the last four, according to Asher.”

“What parties?” Byron asked, just as Winston muttered, “Get the fuck out. Those *freaks*.”

“Asher took over hosting the parties after I stopped hosting them. They were not as exciting when I hosted them,” Winston replied casually. I scoffed. I didn’t believe that for a moment.

“You were hosting sex parties and never invited me?” Alessio drawled. “But since you left Byron off your guest list too, I’ll get over it.”

“Like you two would have shown up if you were invited,” Winston remarked dryly.

“Okay, can we table the sex-party talk for now,” I chimed, annoyed. I needed my brothers to sift through this information with a clear head. And I needed to get *my* head straight before I gave in and murdered the entire Harris clan. “Stuart’s family wants something from Willow, and I need to know what.”

That got their attention.

“What do you mean?” Byron was the most serious and responsible of my brothers. He was also fiercely protective of Willow and Sailor because we saw them practically grow up with our little sister.

“It’s just something they mentioned earlier.”

“What did they say?” Winston asked curiously.

“Never mind that.” Willow’s pregnancy wasn’t their business. “The bottom line is that they want something from her, and I need to know what.”

“It can’t be money,” Byron stated pensively. “The Auclairs are financially stable but nowhere near as loaded as the Harris family.”

“Whatever it is, I need your help.” Byron was a workaholic, and even more importantly, he dealt in information. He had all the right contacts and knew how to penetrate firewalls, even at the highest security level. “It might be life or death.”

“Your instincts have always been reliable,” Byron conceded.

A crack of thunder sounded, and my gaze flicked to Willow. She shifted in bed, then turned again until finally her body succumbed back to sleep.

“That’s right. And this time is no different.” Following my instincts was usually what kept me alive during my missions overseas.

Winston rolled his eyes—he believed in logic.

A child’s voice sounded somewhere in the background, and it wasn’t long before my nephew Kol appeared, bouncing in a chair.

“Hey, buddy,” I greeted him. “You keeping your father in line?”

“Did you grow a whole foot taller or did my screen shrink?” Byron teased.

Kol laughed in that carefree way. “I’m going to be taller than you soon, Uncle Byron.”

“He’s ambitious,” Winston declared, humor coloring his voice.

Then Kol turned to his father, Alessio, who proudly hooked his arm over his shoulder.

“What’s up, pal? I thought you were putting your sister to bed with Maman.”

“She’s already asleep,” Kol announced. “Maman says if you’re not up in five minutes, she’s going to play the game alone,” he added, causing Alessio’s face to turn bloodred. “What game is she playing, Dad?”

“What the fuck?” exclaimed Byron as Winston rolled his eyes.

“We know what that means,” I said, grinning. “Better run, old man.”

He glared at me, and I rubbed my chin, hiding my grin.

“I gotta go.” Alessio couldn’t get off the phone fast enough. “Just let me know the intel you need from me.”

*Click.*

“Well, he didn’t waste any time.” Winston’s humor cut through the silence. “One thing we all have in common is that we’re whipped.”

“Except for Asher,” I corrected him.

Winston’s jaw flexed. Byron tsked while Winston remained silent.

“Should we come and help you out?” Byron offered. “I’m sure Odette and Billie would love a vacation sailing around the world.”

“We can be there tomorrow,” Winston offered, egging me on. Byron was usually too serious, and Winston liked to fuck with people.

“Should we just take the jet?”

“You fuckers aren’t coming here. This is my honeymoon,” I snapped. “Ruin it for me and I’ll ruin you.”

“Oh, he doesn’t want us,” Winston pouted.

“Don’t start your shit with me,” I grumbled. “You’ll be as subtle as a sledgehammer, meanwhile I’m over here trying to take care of the threat so Willow doesn’t pick up on it.”

They both laughed.

“You and subtle don’t belong in the same sentence.” Byron wasn’t going easy on me today.

Winston rolled his eyes and added, “I’m offended you would think so little of me.”

I flipped them off.

“Anyway, I’m going to go play with my wife.” Byron was smiling big, and I gagged at the insinuation. “Royce, I’ll ring up River and see if he can dig up some dirt on Stuart’s parents.”

Before I could say anything else, they left the call.

“Fuck me,” I grumbled.

A whimper from the bedroom had me hurrying to her bedside. She was shaking and moaning and writhing, and I looked around the room for a clue as to what was happening. Nothing but her cries. Was she having a nightmare? It would make sense after the run-in with Stuart’s parents.

I set the knife down on the bedside table and pulled her into my arms. “Wake up, baby. I got you.”

Her tear-filled eyes opened, and her fearful expression broke my heart. “Royce?”

“You were having a bad dream,” I whispered in her ear, holding her quivering body.

She snuggled into my chest and murmured, "It... Oh, Royce, it was horrible."

"Want to talk about it?"

She nodded but remained silent, and I rocked her back and forth, assuming she'd fallen back to sleep.

"The whole thing with Stuart, then his parents tonight... It brought up a memory."

"What's that, baby?"

"The night Anya got pregnant." Her voice was barely above a whisper, almost as if she were scared that her words would bring the nightmare back to life. "Sailor, Aurora, and I went out partying in Miami. We got into trouble, and Anya ended up beaten and... raped."

I stiffened. Apparently this was one of the rare things my sister never shared with my brothers and me. "Who did it?"

"He's dead." Her palm was on my chest, almost as if she needed my heartbeat to steady her. "We promised never to talk about it. I've done pretty well pushing it to the back of my mind for so long, but..."

Our minds worked in mysterious ways, but it didn't take a psychiatrist to draw a connection between Stuart's violence and the memory recurring now.

"It's not your fault. Everything with Stuart likely triggered it," I whispered softly, then pulled her closer. "It's *not* your fault, Willow. Do you understand?"

She rubbed at my chest before she looked up at me and said, "What's with the knife?"

My eyes fell to the table. "In case any idiots try to get into our room. We're leaving at the break of dawn," I said as I slid back into the bed and she cuddled close. "And, Willow?"

"Yes?"

"*Nobody* is going to hurt you. I will always protect you."

She slept through the night, tucked underneath my arms, right where she belonged.

## Chapter 34

### Willow



The next day, we were back on the boat.

The wind roared past me, throwing my hair around wildly as I gripped the rail and watched the island slowly disappear.

The sparkling ocean surrounded us, its colors looking more gray than they had when we first anchored here. Although yesterday's events might've been to blame for that. I thought back to the Harris's accusations and Royce's fury at the party.

After we went back to our room, Asher had them thrown out. It was only after Mrs. Harris started crying like a baby, screaming that their yacht was a day away and she was scared of the jungle, that he put them in a helicopter and told his pilot to drop them off in Bermuda. The remaining guests remained, probably eager to get back to their fancy boats that were scheduled to pick them up at a certain time tomorrow.

I felt violated—the very thought of those sick people trapping me into falling pregnant had never before crossed my mind. I couldn't believe how stupid I'd been—how trusting. I didn't want my baby anywhere near the Harris family, yet I didn't know how to keep them away. It seemed impossible to cut Stuart and his parents off, but I hoped Royce had a plan. If anyone had the money and power to rival Stuart's family, it was him.

Royce's hands wrapped around my waist, and I startled, tightening my hands on the rail until my knuckles turned white.

It was as if he knew where my mind went and brought me back to the present.

Warmth engulfed me as I leaned back into him. We'd always had a connection, but over the last few weeks, it was as if we were one.

He spun me around to face him and lifted my chin with two fingers. Our gazes met and my lips parted. He ran his thumb over my bottom lip gently, trapping me in the intensity of his dark eyes.

"Don't worry about anything, Willow. They'll never get their filthy paws on you or our baby."

The fact that he wouldn't hesitate to unleash his fury on the world, willing to destroy anyone in its path, shouldn't affect me this much, but I found comfort in it.

I bit my lower lip as I studied him. He stood wearing black Tom Ford swim shorts, his sun-kissed skin and ink making him look like a Greek god. Some strands of his black hair were tousled, and I reached up to brush them away from his forehead.

He studied me intently in that way that made me feel like I was the center of his world.

"Thank you for always being there for me."

He sighed. "You're my wife... my best friend... my world. You don't need to thank me."

I closed my eyes and pressed my ear against his chest, listening to his heartbeat. "What if they—" I swallowed a lump in my throat, my mind jumping back to last night's events. "What if they take—"

He brought his finger to my lips. "Nobody will touch you. I promise."

I believed him, because in all the years I'd known him, he'd never broken a promise.

## Royce

I planned on spending every dime of my fortune to keep my wife and *our* baby safe. Not just because I was obsessed with her and loved her more than I thought possible. I'd keep my promise because she was *my* woman.

We stood like that until the boat groaned and lightning broke through the sky.

"Shit, a storm's coming," I muttered.

I ripped myself away from her, grabbed her hand, and hurried toward the pilot cabin where I grabbed the wheel.



“It was just blue skies,” Willow said, concern and wariness lacing her voice.

“The weather can be unpredictable out here. To be honest, we’ve been lucky so far.” A powerful wave rocked into us, sending Willow stumbling against the door. Another massive wave built up, like Poseidon himself rising. “Hold on, Willow.”

“Please tell me this boat is unsinkable,” she whimpered, rushing back over and pressing her face into my chest.

No boat was unsinkable, but I didn’t tell her that. Instead, I opted for the closest thing to the truth.

“We’re safe,” I told her.

She glanced in the direction of the island, her eyes wide with panic. “Should we try and make it back?”

“No, it’s best if we ride it out. It’ll be worse closer to the shoreline.” I gripped the wheel as waves crashed against the windows, rocking the boat up and down.

“Deep breaths.” Willow’s expression was somewhat frozen, and her eyes were locked on the horizon over my shoulder. Holding the wheel with one hand, I cupped her cheek with the other, forcing her wild gaze to mine. “Breathe for me, baby.” I took a deep inhale, and she mimicked the motion. “Good girl. Now exhale.”

“I’m good,” she murmured, giving me a shaky smile. “All good.”

“It won’t last,” I assured her, keeping her tucked into me. I returned my attention to the horizon, steering us through the storm.

“What can I do to help?” she whispered.

“Stay close so I know you’re okay.”

“Forever my protector,” she swooned, drawing a smile out of me.

For the next thirty minutes, we powered through the storm that dissipated as fast as it appeared.

“That was my first storm at sea,” she admitted, her face still an alarming shade of green, and I couldn’t help but smile.

“Hopefully the last one.”

She grinned, and I breathed evenly for the first time in what felt like years. She wore a light blue summer dress, making her eyes appear more blue than green. She was beautiful in anything, but I loved her in dresses.

Wrapping her dark curls around my wrist, I tilted her head back. She bit her lower lip, arousal visible on her face. I turned autopilot on and directed

all my attention to my wife.

“How do you feel about prolonging our honeymoon and combining it with a few business trips?”

She shrugged. “What did you have in mind?”

I grabbed her perfect ass with my free hand, my dick already straining against my swim shorts. This woman could be wearing a potato sack and still turn me on. Because with my hands on her, she looked like *mine*.

“South America, either starting or ending with Venezuela.” Her expression changed into anxiousness and the need to ravage her slowly dissipated, replaced by the urge to wipe away her worries. “What’s worrying you?”

“Everything.” She closed her eyes and exhaled. “I’m pissed off that I was set up with a faulty condom.” A chill set in the air. “I’m so mad at them, but even more at myself. I should have been more careful.”

“You couldn’t have known.”

She chewed on her bottom lip nervously. “Do you think Stuart and his parents will try something?”

There was a brief pause before I answered. “They might, but they won’t get to you. I’ll use all my resources to destroy them.”

If it was the last thing I did, I’d eliminate every threat to Willow. I trusted my brothers with my life, and Willow’s, and I knew they’d come through. One way or the other.

“Thank you.” Just like that, the tension in her shoulders eased a little bit. “What did Stuart’s father mean about a citizen’s arrest when he saw us?” she asked.

“He’s delusional.”

“But why would he arrest us? Because of what you did to Stuart?”

I could admit that that day in the hotel room probably wasn’t one of my finer moments. But the fucker deserved it for what he did to Willow. The anger began to bubble again and I had to tamp it down.

No, I didn’t regret teaching Stuart a lesson. The only thing I regretted was taking Willow with me. If I hadn’t, there’d be a warrant out for me only. Hindsight was definitely a bitch.

“The arrest warrant will be withdrawn, just wait and see. They don’t have a case against us.”

Fuck, I meant to ask Asher if he was the one who cleaned the hotel room after us. Or knowing Alexei, it could have been him.

“Us?” Goddammit, I slipped. But then she surprised me again. “Regardless of what happens, I’d be a fugitive with you in every lifetime.” She sighed, leaning back into me. “I’m sorry I dragged you into this.”

“You didn’t. I want you and the baby to be happy and safe.” I smacked her ass affectionately. “So you better be.”

A smile grazed her full lips and she gasped, as if appalled by my gesture. “Or what?”

“Or I’ll spank you.”

“Spanking and happiness, I guess they go hand in hand,” she teased in a husky voice, the arousal in it shooting straight to my cock.

“Do you want to be punished?” My voice dropped. “It might hurt, but you’ll scream the whole ocean down in pleasure.” Her breathing hitched and visible goose bumps broke over her skin. “Do you want that?”

She nodded.

“Use your words, wife.”

Her eyes flashed. “Yes, I want that.”

And just like that, my dick stood at attention.

“Bend over and grab the wheel.”

Heat blossomed in her cheeks. Her beautiful round ass jutted out, and her back arched gracefully. My hand trailed down, cupping both her cheeks into my palms.

She glanced over her shoulder, eyes glazed with lust, as I pulled her dress up to her waist and found her naked.

“Mrs. Ashford, where are your panties?” I lightly smacked her porcelain flesh, doing my best to hide my satisfaction. Even my cock threatened to spill in my shorts seeing her utterly naked and splayed out for me.

“I wanted you to have better access,” she breathed.

“Ah, baby,” I drawled with satisfaction, squeezing in appreciation and admiring my handprint on her skin. “That pleases me.”

“Spank me a-again...” Shock washed over me, and I knew I could never come back from loving this woman.

My fingers caressed her skin before I spanked her a few more times, her moans and whimpers getting louder with each one. She ground against me, her arousal filling my nostrils.

I parted her ass cheeks, then dragged my finger from her entrance to her ass.

“Mmmm.”

“You like that?” We both knew I didn’t need to ask. The evidence was smeared all over my fingers. She was *drenched*. My index finger connected with her hole, smearing the wetness all around it, then gently pushed the tip of my finger in.

My free hand connected with her nape. “Answer me.”

She let out a needy sound, then said in a barely audible voice, “Yes. I need more.”

It was all the answer I needed. I discarded my swim shorts and drove balls-deep inside her. She shifted forward, her forehead coming to rest against the captain’s wheel.

“Oh, shit,” she moaned, her body moving in sync with mine.

“Fuck, your perfect pussy is strangling my cock so good,” I grunted.

Caging her against the wheel, I thrust in and out of her hard and fast. While I pounded into her like it was the last time I’d have her, the tip of my finger pushed gently in and out of her ass. The movements of my cock thrusting inside her matched that of my finger, and she began to writhe against me.

“Ohhhh... *Royce*... Yesss!”

She fell apart around me, her tight pussy strangling my cock and wrenching my own release from me.

## Chapter 35

### Willow



Royce was a beast in bed. In the shower. In his office on his desk. The kitchen counter. In the cockpit.

And now—the wheelhouse.

By the time we were finished, I was a boneless heap of molten pleasure, unable to move. He pulled out of me, tucking me to his side, and I let out a blissful sigh. As I rearranged my dress though, I couldn't help but feel he was still holding back.

"Royce."

"Yes, baby."

"You know I'm not fragile, right?" His eyes locked with mine. "I trust you implicitly." A terse nod. "Don't hold back with me."

Before I could formulate another word, he picked me up and carried me to our bed, and I didn't wake up again until the moon was high in the sky.



"Aren't you sleepy?" I murmured to Royce as I stretched out and blinked the sleep out of my eyes. I stifled a yawn and gazed over at him, scanning his tight brow and pursed lips, which were lit up by his laptop screen.

He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Not yet. I'm ready for round two."

I frowned. "You mean round five. Or is it six?"

There was a sweet soreness between my thighs, but it would seem my body didn't care because arousal throbbed low in my belly. I shifted on the bed and met his eyes, tension shining in them. His mouth was set in a grim line, his jaw tense.

"What's the matter?" I rasped breathlessly.

"Nothing."

I took his hand and squeezed it gently. "Royce, please. I can handle it."

"You're the best thing that has ever happened to me, Mrs. Ashford." His voice was quiet with no trace of humor. "Am I yours?"

"Yes. You're everything, Royce." I needed him to believe this. "We've lasted a decade as best friends. We'll have decades as lovers and friends. It's the best of both worlds. Now tell me what's the matter." Insecurity inched its way into my heart. Maybe he needed more than I could give him. More than I'd *already* given him.

"I told you." He flashed me a grin, this one a little more convincing at least. "I'm ready to go again."

I couldn't explain why, but his words from the other day came back to me.

"Do you want to... gag me?" I asked hesitantly. When it came to sex, Royce was intense, and while he exceeded my wildest expectations every time, I sensed he needed more.

"I want to do that and so much more." He paused, trying to gauge my reaction, and I smiled reassuringly. "Gag you, tie you up, whip you."

His words burned up all the oxygen in the cabin and set my body ablaze.

*Whip me?*

"Oh," was all I managed to squeal.

"Yeah, *oh*."

I held his gaze as I reached for his hand. His expression didn't shift, almost as if he braced himself for rejection.

"Show me," I said, my pulse racing into overdrive.

He stared at me for a second, then led me out of bed and down the hallway, both of us naked as the day we were born.

"Wh-what are you doing?" I giggled, wondering why he was suddenly in a rush. If I'd known he would kick me out of bed in the middle of the night, I would've thought twice before asking.

We headed toward a section of the boat we rarely ventured to until we stopped in front of a heavy mahogany door. My heart was pounding as he pushed it open and then stood back, letting me walk through. Once I was inside, my gasp filled the space and my blood heated.

“Holy... shit,” I breathed, peering around the room, the scent of leather and polished timber perfuming the air.

“Scared?”

I shifted and locked eyes with Royce, who was now stiff at my side, as though he waited for my reaction. His pupils were now black, and his nostrils flared ever so slightly. I stood there, hypnotized by this change, adrenaline rushing through my veins.

“Willow, are you scared?” His voice was deceptively soft, each word slow and measured.

My mouth was dry, my heart thumping so hard I feared it’d leave my chest.

“Scared? No,” I finally managed to rasp. *Unsure? Nervous? Well...*

He leaned over me, and all the oxygen in the room was siphoned out. “Good, now let me show you the side of me you’ve never seen.”

He examined me for a few moments, his eyes never wavering, then reached for my chin, his touch searing.

“We need a safe word,” he said darkly, sending shivers down my spine. One thing was for certain—I was no longer sleepy.

“Pineapple.”

He chuckled.

“Only you, baby.” He lowered his head, brushing his lips against mine. “Pineapple it is, then. If it gets to be too much, use that word.”

He came to stand behind me, his heat seeping into me. He gathered my loose curls at the nape of my neck, then braided the strands so it fell down my back. Jealousy poked at me as I thought of how many women he’d done this for. The number had to be high considering how expertly his fingers moved before tying the end in a sturdy knot and then dragging his hands down my arms.

He angled my head to one side, dusting kisses on my back and shoulders. “Something displeases you.” It wasn’t a question—he knew me too well.

The muscles in my lower belly clenched, and I worried that my insecurities would put a stop to what I still desperately wanted.

“I don’t... no... yes.” He bit into the sensitive flesh at my nape, and I whimpered softly. “You’re very good at that.” I slipped a hand over the long braid. “You must have had a lot of practice...”

I held my breath, expecting defensiveness or at least disappointment. But once again, Royce surprised me. He placed a soft kiss beneath my ear and darted his tongue out, licking a hot stripe down the column of my neck, and somehow I could feel his grin on my skin.

“None of them matter but you,” he whispered, sending the butterflies in the pit of my stomach into overdrive. He tugged my hair, and I fell back against him. “Do you understand?”

“Y-yes,” I rasped as longing clawed at me. Damn, was it possible to orgasm from his demands alone? I felt arousal dripping down my legs and decided that yes—it just might be.

“Turn around,” he commanded. And when I did, I met his burning gaze. The scent of my arousal and his masculine scent lingered in the space between us while excitement drummed in my ears. “I’m going to bind you now.”

My thighs clenched at hearing the dark purr in his voice. Lust blazed through me, threatening to explode.

“Okay,” I agreed, and his eyes lit up with fire.

He took my elbow and moved me over a piece of equipment with leather shackles and cuffs.

“Raise your hands above your head.”

I followed his command without hesitation, my breaths coming out in soft pants. I was drenched, probably dripping onto the plush carpet underneath us at this point.

This felt exhilarating, liberating, letting Royce take over. I trusted him with my life, my body and... my heart. I stared at his defined stomach as he fastened the cuffs, his scent cocooning and intoxicating me. I wet my lips, wanting to lick every inch of his stomach.

He stepped back, his expression hooded and full of promise.

Slowly kneeling in front of me, his head at the same level as my pussy, he leaned forward, his eyes never leaving me, and inhaled deeply. My pussy clenched in response. *Fuck*. I hadn’t realized it, but my body was screaming for Royce’s domination.

He licked my core, then grinned wickedly as he straightened, reaching for a crop with leather ends. The moment the cold leather touched my



heated skin, I quivered at the sensation. He slowly dragged it down from my breast to my navel, then up again in a V pattern to my other breast, leisurely circling it—taunting me.

Then, without warning, he flicked my right nipple with the crop. I cried out, my limbs pulling against the restraints. A combination of brand-new sensations coursed through my veins, but before I could dwell on it, the second flick connected with my sex.

My body jerked and my eyes filled with tears as sharp gratification spiked through me. The pulsing heat between my legs was intense, and I worried I'd black out from the pleasure.

"How does it feel?"

"It—incredible. Too much... not enough," I panted, my fingers curling into fists.

He flicked again, hitting my other nipple, and my head fell back. My body sang at the sweet, stinging bites.

"I can taste your arousal," he whispered, walking around me, the crop dragging over my burning skin.

He flicked it against my pussy again and a loud moan slipped through my lips. Another made contact with my ass.

"I didn't say you could make noise." *Shit, how did I not know this could be so hot?* The crop came down against the same spot on my ass again and I whimpered, biting my lip to stifle the noise. "Good girl."

My eyes fluttered shut in bliss at his praise, making me question my sanity. But the moment I felt his lips on my skin, kissing, biting, and licking everywhere his crop had been, all my thoughts left me. I knew more pain would follow as he dragged his crop down my belly, but right now, his mouth was providing me with a type of electric buzzing, and the effect this had on me was embarrassingly pleasant. Embarrassing because of the sounds I was making, the way I begged him for more and fought against the restraints to bring myself closer to the crop.

When he hit my clit, I cried out as sensation washed over me. He dragged his fingers over my entrance, and I bucked against him, drenching him.

"Does my wife want more?" He brought his fingers to my mouth and pushed them inside. "Open your eyes and taste yourself, baby." I did as I was told, completely under his spell, our gazes locking. "Suck like it's my cock."

He pushed his fingers deeper and I hollowed out my cheeks, tasting the saltiness of my arousal. Another moan vibrated in my throat and his eyes blazed.

He pulled his fingers from my mouth and a whimpery protest left me. He kissed me hard, his tongue invading my mouth. Snaking his arms around my waist, his fingers digging into my flesh, he pulled me against him.

His chest against mine, he devoured me like I was his last meal. I rutted against him, hungry for friction. I didn't care how desperate I looked. He took mercy on me, his finger finding its way between my legs again. One, two, three circles around my slick clit, then a thrust inside my pussy and I fell part, coming around his fingers violently. I shuddered and mewled and moaned until I sagged against him, every limb turning to jelly.

I tried to catch my breath when suddenly my ankles were unbound and he hooked them around his hips, his hands clutching my thighs. He positioned himself at my entrance, and in one swift thrust, he was all the way inside me.

He groaned in my ear while I cried out. His muscles quivered against me and he thrust into me again. Deep and hard. He slammed into me again and again, his face in the crook of my neck, his harsh breathing fanning my heated skin.

His movements grew more frantic and the pleasure built up inside me as tension built at the base of my spine.

"Oh... Ohhh... God..."

"Not God." Thrust. "*I own your pleasure,*" he gritted, pistoning inside me. "Come for me." He pressed a kiss to my shoulder. "Now."

I broke into a million pieces as earth-shattering bliss washed over me. It was agonizing, intense, and so consuming that I lost myself somewhere along the way, becoming one with him.

"Such a good girl," he grunted, coming right after with a loud roar, stealing every single piece of me. *He's had them all along.* The thought jolted me, and I held him tighter.

For a moment, he remained buried inside me, his heart fluttering against my chest and his breathing erratic. Then he pulled out of me and set me on my feet, his one arm still supporting my weight as he unbuckled the cuffs. The moment my hands were freed, he scooped me up and we sank onto the floor.

Cradled in his lap, I pressed my forehead against his chest and roamed a finger along his naked body.

“You’re perfect, baby,” he murmured, drawing a sigh out of me. “Did you... What did you think?”

My cheek resting against his chest, I lifted my head and looked up to meet his guarded expression.

“No words,” I said around a laugh, barely able to keep my eyes open. I’d just had the most intense sexual experience of my life, and he expected a review?

He smirked, and the sight soothed me. “Would you...?” He trailed off, his fingers trembling as he pushed strands of damp hair off my forehead. “Would you do it again?”

“I want to do it all with you,” I whispered, repeating my words from earlier. “As long as it’s only me you’re doing it with.”

He hugged me tightly, and I felt more than heard his relieved breath.

“Good.” His eyes softened as I gazed up at him. “Because I don’t know what I was thinking when I proposed celibacy.”

His unique scent engulfed me when he stood up, never letting me go, and headed for the bed. Pulling back the duvet, he laid me down and then climbed in beside me.

“I think I like our new room,” I murmured, fighting sleep.

## Chapter 36

### Royce



It was incredible how someone I'd known for so long could still manage to surprise me. Our dynamic had completely changed, yet the level of comfort I felt with Willow was natural, easy. It wasn't about the way she unraveled around me like she was always meant to be mine. Or the way she submitted to me.

It was the way my chest expanded when she whispered words of affection. And when she reached for me in the night, sighing happily as I pushed her hair away from her face, I knew she owned me. She brought out the rawest emotions in me, accepting my intensity without reservation.

We'd been out at sea for the past two months—avoiding the States—and had stopped at countless ports throughout South America. We never stayed long; it wasn't worth the risk.

I stood over the bed where she lay on her side, fast asleep. It was ridiculous, but even now, I found myself missing how her eyes flashed green when she was aroused and turned a shade closer to turquoise when she was worried. I had half a mind to wake her up just to see what color they'd be.

It was my mission in life to make Willow happy, and the smile she'd worn on her face since our wedding day put me at ease unlike anything else. I intended to continue giving her reasons to wear it.

Putting a knee on the bed, I leaned over and pressed a kiss on her cheek. My mouth pulled up at the corners when she mumbled sleepily. Her naked body was curved around the pillow, hugging it fiercely against her slightly swollen belly.

Her lips parted and a soft moan spilled free as she leaned into my touch. Anything and everything I sprung on her, she met with enthusiasm. It turned out Willow herself was a kinky little minx.

"I'm going to get some coffee," I told her, eyeing the marks on her skin with pride and possessiveness.

It was our two-month anniversary, and I hoped my surprise would be a welcomed one. I'd had beignets delivered from New Orleans early this morning and had already liaised with one of Winston's Venezuelan contacts to meet me at Puerto Cabello Port to hand them over. A piece of custom jewelry, designed by my sister-in-law in Paris, was also waiting to be collected, but something told me Willow would be more taken with the doughy goods.

Her eyes fluttered open and she blinked a few times before focusing on my face. She smiled dreamily, bringing her hand to my cheek and cupping it.

"Forget the coffee, come to bed," she croaked.

I grinned. "No can do. I need to make sure my wife's happy."

"Your wife *is* happy," she whined. "Come back to bed and I'll let you fuck my mouth again." The way she said it so casually almost made me choke, and I felt myself smile wide.

*Down, boy*, I scolded myself as I watched a red hue cover her cheeks, spreading down her entire body. I'd get her gifts first, *then* I'd let myself be seduced.

"When I come back, I'll let you suck me off like a good girl," I promised, taking my fill of her nakedness. My dick insisted on one more taste before I left, but I knew how that would end. Hours of fucking and then another nap—rinse and repeat.

"Oh, husband. You know it's my hormones making me extra horny," she purred, bringing her hand over her flushed breasts and twisting a nipple between her fingers. She shifted, her legs spreading wide and giving me a glimpse of her glistening pussy. "Please, don't leave me like this."

And she had me. I crawled over to her, my wide shoulders pushing between her legs, and I licked her from her clit to her asshole.

"If it's the hormones, baby, I'll keep you knocked up for the rest of our lives."

She giggled, hooking her legs over my shoulders and pushing her fingers into my hair, keeping my head there. I nipped her clit, partly in

punishment and partly in appreciation at her brazenness—who knew Willow would be so happy to smother me with her pussy. All I knew was I loved it when she took charge and showed me what she wanted.

She bucked against my mouth and I thrust my tongue inside her.

For the next thirty minutes, we got lost in each other. I pulled orgasm after orgasm out of her until she begged for reprieve, and eventually fell asleep with my tongue buried inside her.

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## Chapter 37

### Willow



I woke up sated but somewhat disappointed not to find Royce in bed with me. I'd gotten used to waking up with his face buried between my legs or trailing kisses over my skin. My new favorite way to start the morning was with him fucking me into the mattress, his hand around my throat.

He completed me in so many ways, and it almost felt criminal to be so happy. Aside from the fact we *were* criminals—fugitives at that.

Still, it was impossible not to smile as I rolled onto my back and—

“What the fuck,” I gasped, pulling at the sheets and scrambling until my back hit the headboard. My hand instinctively went to my lower abdomen protectively as fear hit me in the chest, seeing who was seated on the edge of the bed, staring at me.

“Hello, Willow.” Stuart’s voice sent revulsion through me and I gripped the sheets like my life depended on it.

“What are you doing here?” I rasped, hating the fear I could hear lacing through my words. My eyes darted around, hoping by some miracle Royce would appear, but I knew there’d be no such luck. He’d left on a supply run, and he usually took at least two hours on the tiny speedboat.

Stuart must have read my expression, because he leaned closer, smiling menacingly. “Your *husband* isn’t here,” he spat.

Shit, he was pissed, and the unhinged look in his gaze sent alarm bells ringing. My stomach twisted as I ran through my options. I could throw the lamp on my bedside at him and run, but he’d likely be quicker. Plus, I was

naked—how far did I think I was going to get? I searched around, looking for something—anything—that could be used as a weapon.

Stuart's face swam before me, my stress making me see double until I blinked the blurriness away.

"What are you doing here?" I croaked, attempting to sound unaffected but struggling to pull air in through my nose and mouth. I coughed to clear my throat, and that was when I realized my fingers were turning numb. Something was wrong. My vision blurred and I attempted to blink it away as I shifted into a seated position, but a wave of dizziness forced me back against the mattress.

"Taking back what's mine," he said.

Panic clawed at me. "What did you do?"

My voice came out slurred and I fought the urge to throw up. I attempted to stumble off the bed, but I barely made it to the edge of it when he yanked me back by my hair.

*No, no, no.*

"Not so fast, whore," he said, pointing a gun at my temple. *Did he always have a gun?* My brain fought to keep up.

"Stuart, please," I croaked, terror for my baby soaking through every fiber of me. "Think of the baby."

"We'll be going on our own honeymoon," he said, smiling viciously.

I opened my mouth to scream when something hard hit me over the head and full darkness engulfed me.



I groaned and turned onto my side, feeling around to get an idea of my surroundings as I tried to blink away the darkness. I felt a tingle in my fingers and toes, then the cold, hard surface beneath me. Finally, the pounding behind my eyes and throbbing in my temples had the events with Stuart rushing back to me.

I wrenched my eyelids open and found that my wrists were tied. Where was I? What was going on?

I took a deep breath in, letting my lungs expand and push the panic out. *Breathe, Willow. Breathe.*



My eyes darted down my body and I was relieved to find myself dressed in Royce's white T-shirt and boxers. But where was I?

I shut my eyes again as I tried to think, and it seemed to help with my nausea. I had to remember what happened. I visualized Royce telling me he'd be back in a few hours before falling asleep again, only to wake up and find... Stuart.

Oh my God. I'd been kidnapped by my ex-fiancé.

I pried my eyes open through sheer force of will, gritted my teeth, and refused to let panic rise within my chest.

I seemed to be in some sort of concrete bunker with two windows on either side of the steel-reinforced door. A sliver of sunlight filtered through the wooden slats, and I scrambled to my feet to see if I could make anything out.

There was no furniture other than a filthy bed fastened with iron bars—the same ones that were currently bound to my wrists. Bile coated my throat. *Oh my God, Stuart has lost his fucking mind.*

"Good, you're awake." My head whipped toward the familiar voice, and I knew I was seconds away from puking. "Happy to see me?"

"What is wrong with you, asshole?" I hissed, my voice sounding too pathetically weak. "You drugged me." Stuart flashed a twisted smile. "You could have hurt my baby."

"It won't cause you any long-term harm."

My pulse skyrocketed. There was a mad glint in his eyes. Had he always been sick? He looked like a psychopath standing in front of me, sneering.

"You can't be sure," I scolded. My tongue felt thick in my mouth and I retched. I twisted and threw up to the side, the scent of vomit causing me to gag again. I swallowed the bile in my throat before I asked, "What did you drug me with?"

Stuart smoothed a hand over the front of his shirt.

"My mother assured me it won't hurt the baby." He rolled his eyes. "She used the same one when she was pregnant with me."

I bit my tongue, swallowing the words that burned in my mouth. Nothing about that was reassuring.

I tried a different approach rather than pointing out he and his family were certifiably insane.

“Stuart, you have to let me go.” If it meant getting out of here, I was willing to beg, to appeal to any sense of humanity he had. “This... this can’t be good for my...” I cut myself off, hating the next words I pushed past my lips. “For *our* baby.”

His smile collapsed into a frown. “You don’t mean it. You’re trying to take the baby away from me. You’re trying to ruin us. My family.” He spread his arms. “But I’ll show you we can be together again.”

“Be together?”

I couldn’t wrap my head around what he was saying. The situation was too surreal.

“Yes, I’ll show you we are meant to be. Ashford is just a phase.”

“He’s my husband!”

Jesus Christ. How could I have missed the signs?

“We’ll remedy that. Once I fuck you, you’ll see reason. Royce will just be a bad memory.” He spat the name, the whites of his eyes terrifying in the shadows.

I shook my head. “No. He’s my husband. He’s the man I’ve always loved.” Panic climbed higher in my chest, but I forced it back down. “You cannot erase that. Please, Stuart. We can be friends.”

He reached for his belt, undoing it slowly. “Looks like I’ll have to fuck his memory out of you.”

“Wh-what?” No. Please no.

“You’ll see, Willow. You’ll like it.”

I swallowed bile, the acid burning the back of my throat. “I—I’m feeling sick, Stuart.”

“Drugs were a necessity.” Remorse entered his voice. “We just need some time and I’ll fix you.”

The full impact of what was happening hit me. Stuart was out of his freaking mind. Deranged.

But I needed to keep him talking until I could come up with a plan or... until Royce found me. I had no doubt he was looking for me right now.

“Where are your parents?” I asked as I battled to keep the hot tears from pooling in my eyes.

“They’re right outside,” he snapped. “They’ll be our witnesses.”

I fought the need to throw up again. “Witnesses?”

“Yes. Your marriage to Royce will be null and void.” He was downright crazy. His voice escalated before he took a deep breath and proceeded to

push his pants over his briefs. “He’ll see that you want *me*.” Another sadistic smirk flickered over his face. “Or we’ll have to kill him,” he said simply.

Stale air scraped against my lungs as I watched him discard his pants. I yanked my wrists, fighting against the iron headboard I was tied to.

It was clear by now that there was no reasoning with people like Stuart and his parents. They didn’t see me as a person, but as a means to get what they wanted. The Harris inheritance, which stipulated an heir was required to claim it.

“How big is this inheritance?” I asked as I shifted on the bed, working on the ropes while prolonging the discussion. I moved my hands behind me, searching for any way to break the rope.

“Fifty million. It goes to the baby.”

I wouldn’t give a shit if it was fifty billion. There wasn’t enough money in this world that would make up for what he’d already done.

“Why not to your parents or you?” I said, trying to buy time.

I kept my eyes on Stuart as I worked my leather shackle over the nail as discreetly as possible. Maybe there was a stitch I could loosen—*anything* to give me and my baby a fighting chance.

“Grandfather’s not happy with us. But our baby is untainted...” He grinned. “My grandmother passed her inheritance to me, but I’ve spent it all.” He let out a snort. “My grandpa wasn’t impressed with the sex parties I was spending all my money on, hence the fucking clause.”

Stuart paced the dirty ground, his hard-on a clear tent in his briefs.

Jesus Christ.

I wished Royce had cut his dick off, not just his testicle. I worked faster on my binds, sweat beading down my back.

“Why don’t you just do what the old man says so he’ll leave the money to you?” I suggested just as the rope loosened around my wrists. Almost there.

He stopped in front of me, his dick too close to me for my liking. I froze, praying he wouldn’t try to get closer.

“Because the old man is stubborn.” He sounded annoyed. “And we can’t kill him because he’s spent half his money on security. Trust me, we’ve tried.” Disapproval formed a deep crease in his brow as he mumbled something that sounded like *Fort Knox*. “But now we have you.” He knelt

next to me, his fingers smoothing over my skin, and I stifled a gag. “We’re meant to be together. I love you.”

He beamed while a sick feeling twisted in my stomach.

“Stuart, I’m married.” My voice trembled, the coppery taste of blood in my mouth a reminder of the terror I felt. “I love Royce, not—”

I didn’t get to finish the statement. Pain exploded in my cheek and my ears rang from the force of his blow.

“Don’t say that fucking name,” he roared. “In fact, don’t open your mouth. Not unless it’s to suck my dick.”

I let out a small cry when he slapped me again, silent tears dripping down my cheeks.

This man was beyond delusional, and his face might be the last I saw unless I took matters into my own hands.

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## Chapter 38

### Royce



The moment I stepped on the deck, beignets in hand, my gut screamed that something was wrong.

I was met with silence, and when I entered our room, something felt amiss. I went searching for Willow, but she was nowhere to be found. With each passing second, my panic rose and I rushed through the boat, inspecting every corner.

The blood in my veins turned to ice as I rushed to the surveillance and sped through the security footage from the past two hours.

My heart raced in my chest as I watched the scenes play out on the monitor. The two of us this morning, fucking her mouth and eating her out, and then her falling back asleep and me slipping out of bed. It was the next scene that had my hands shaking.

*Stuart.*

Before Willow even stirred, he was pricking her with a needle. When she opened her eyes, her face paled and she looked like she was having trouble breathing.

My knuckles turned white watching Stuart manhandle her naked body when she eventually passed out.

My senses went on high alert when Stuart's parents came in next, and together, they dragged Willow out of the room and off the boat.

The sound of footsteps reached me and I reached for my knife. When the door to the surveillance room swung open, I found Asher standing there. And Kian Cortes.

"Willow's been kidnapped," was Asher's greeting.

“How do you know that?” My hand tightened around the handle of my knife, distrust building. “Are you in on it? First Stuart’s parents on your island, and now this.”

Asher’s anger was a pulsing force, filling the small cabin.

When he remained silent, my gaze darted to his companion. “And what are you doing here, Kian? Are you in on it?”

“No.”

“You’ve run into Willow back in Lisbon and put her in the cab,” I pointed out. “You’re telling me it’s a coincidence you’re around twice now when she’s in trouble.”

Kian seemed unperturbed.

“I happened to be in the room when Asher was alerted, and I offered my help, but if you’d rather not have reinforcements, by all means, I’ll go.”

Having backup was smarter. I didn’t know what I’d be going up against. Willow’s safety was a priority.

“Thank you.” Then a realization sunk in as surprise coasted through me. “Alert?”

“Yes. When Stuart and his parents breached security, I got an alert.” Asher’s answer sent fury through me and I narrowed my eyes on him.

“You’ve been spying on me.” Not that it mattered now, but once I got Willow back, I’d beat his ass to a pulp.

“I still have the security system connected to my phone—don’t worry though, I disabled the cameras in the bedrooms.” He winked at me. As if I should be *grateful*.

“How could you let them take her?” I roared.

“What the fuck did you want me to do?” Irritation flared on his face. “Fly on my magic carpet and appear out of thin air? I tried calling you. I thought they got to you too.”

“Which is why we’re here now,” Kian added. “About to save the day.”

I tabled my fury at the intrusion because they were right, I needed help. And there was nobody more competent than these two.

“They took her,” I whispered, putting my knife away.

My wife. My *everything*.

“You got a plan?” Kian asked, clearly seeing my helplessness stamped on my face. “Because we do. I was able to make a few calls on the way here.”

“They’ll regret ever fucking with her,” Asher comforted.

“I’ll make sure of it,” I gritted. Their last moments on this earth would be painful. “And if there’s one scratch on her—”

I couldn’t even think about it. She and the baby better be safe.

“We’ll find her,” Asher assured.

I only hoped that when we did, it wasn’t too late. Because without her, this life wasn’t worth living. Willow was all that mattered to me.



We pulled up surveillance footage from the streets and buildings in Caracas, thanks to Asher’s and Kian’s connections to the mafia. We’d followed their tracks all the way to the remote location outside the city.

The temperatures were warm, but I wore a leather jacket kitted with weapons—handguns, revolvers, knives. Asher was dressed similarly, both of us gripping handguns, while Kian opted for a single handgun.

Asher’s phone buzzed again, and my nerves teetered on the edge. The constant chiming of his phone wasn’t helping my current state.

“For fuck’s sake, would you turn that fucking thing off.”

Willow and I had turned our own phones off mere days ago to ensure we weren’t being tailed.

“She’ll be okay, Royce,” he said, seeing through my misplaced frustration.

“Asher’s got some heat to deal with,” Kian chimed, amused.

I narrowed my eyes on him. “And you’re here because...?”

He shrugged. “What can I say? This is more exciting.”

Everything aside, the fact he chose to help me spoke volumes.

“Thank you.” My voice was brimming with emotion. Maybe Willow’s pregnancy hormones were transferring to me.

A terse nod and we returned our attention to the task at hand.

We stood at the forest’s tree line, watching a concrete building and parking lot surrounding it as we waited for the sun to set. We’d use the cover to sneak up on the Harris family and the group of mercenaries they’d brought along. They were positioned around the building, some even lingering on the roof, as they scouted the area.

To prevent being spotted, we came through the forest, parking our vehicles on the street that was on the other side of the woods.

There wasn't much telling us what was happening inside, but that didn't stop my imagination from running wild. The need to swoop in this instant was overwhelming.

Asher must have picked up on my tension because his next words snapped my attention back to him.

"So should I play it safe and delete all the surveillance except for the kidnapping?"

Tension in my muscles was pulled taut.

"So you watched the surveillance?"

He snickered. "I never said that."

"Did you enjoy the show, your sick voyeur?" I had to taunt him or risk losing my mind. I was itching for a fight, and sitting here in the bushes of the tree line wasn't helping. "Maybe I should beat you up and ensure your amnesia."

His lip twitched. "I have no fucking idea what you're talking about."

"Sure. That's why you never turned off your phone connection to the surveillance on that boat."

He shrugged. "Kinky is your jam, not mine."

I snorted. "Yeah, right."

"Okay, maybe I have my versions of kinky, but watching my half-sibling fucking his wife isn't one of them."

"Well, that's a relief," I retorted wryly. "It's good to have boundaries."

"Is it?" My eyes darted to him for a second before he continued, "If you need to have a round of boxing or a physical activity to release some tension, just say so. I can practically see steam coming off you in waves."

"Physical activity?"

"I'm not your wife, you perv. I meant if you want me to beat your fucking ass."

"As if you ever could—"

"Jesus, you two," Kian cut both of us off. "Would you cut the shit? It's like listening to an old married couple."

"How would you know? It's not like you're married." Tension released from my muscles with each word, but worry and the itch to fight remained. "Unless you partake in some kinky stuff and role play." He flipped me off, although the amusement on his face didn't escape me. Kian was a bit of a mystery. Nobody knew why he left the Cortes cartel, nor had he ever been



spotted with a woman on his arm. He took privacy to a whole new level. Suddenly I got somber, and added, "Thank you both for all your help."

Surprise flashed in their gazes, but they quickly got themselves together and titled their heads in acknowledgement.

Returning my attention to the building and its surrounding concrete parking lot, I scanned the area.

"I count twenty, plus the Harris family," I muttered.

"Same," Kian noted.

"There's a vehicle with two more," Asher added.

My gaze followed his line of sight. Indeed, there was a shadow of two figures seated in a white sedan. I narrowed my eyes, focusing on their outline, when a realization sunk in.

"Stuart's parents."

I wanted to rip out every limb from their bodies and hear their screams. Instead, I forced myself to breathe through my fury. I had to fight the urge not to march through and start firing blindly.

But I couldn't risk letting my temper hurt Willow and the baby. My hand tightened around my handgun. Once Willow was safe, I would deal with Stuart and his parents.

Everyone I'd served with had the capacity for violence—obviously—but I would never have imagined him capable of *this*. Nor had I realized that Stuart joined the service already sick in the head.

Rage rolled over me in an icy, wrathful wave.

"Do you have the blueprint for the building?" I asked Asher.

"Yeah, there isn't much to it." He ran a hand through his hair. "One big space."

There was something in his expression, a scowl that didn't sit well with me. His eyes darted to Kian, who gave his head a subtle shake.

"What is it?" I asked.

Tense silence stretched for a long second that was heavier than a fully loaded cargo ship.

"There's only one thing in the entire space," Asher stated as his tone darkened. "A bed."

Rage sliced through my chest and my self-control, images flashing in my mind.

Before I knew it, I was making a beeline for the target, my footsteps silent against the ground.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Asher hissed behind me, but he followed.

“Keep your cool.” Kian came up on my rear.

“I’m not waiting in the shadows for Stuart to rape my wife.”

An exasperated breath sounded behind me. “She might hold it against you if you, or all of us, get killed.”

“If I get killed, make sure she’s safe,” I said, my calm tone a total contrast to how I was feeling.

“If I get killed, I’m coming back to life and killing you,” Asher deadpanned.

“As long as my wife’s safe.”

Asher froze for a second before he recovered. “Fuck, you *are* pussy-whipped.”

“Ten years in the making,” I admitted unashamedly. “Now, let’s kick some ass.”

“I might come back from the dead and kill you both,” Kian muttered.

After that, I tuned them out and let loose, crimson pooling my vision as we started shooting.

Asher’s smile iced over, and for the first time, I saw the Ashford in him. “Let’s kick some ass.”

## Chapter 39

### Willow



I attempted to play along, pretending I understood what delusional crap Stuart was blabbing about. I stopped listening when he went on a tangent about how he *knew* I wanted him and that my marrying Royce was a ploy to get his attention. Like I said, *delusional*.

Right now, protecting my baby was my priority. I'd negotiate with the devil himself if it meant his or her safety.

"Stuart..." He whipped his head to me, and it was like he'd forgotten I was here with the way his eyes widened and he pursed his lips. Stuart did *not* like to be interrupted. I was searching for something to say that wouldn't sound fake when the sound of gunshots broke through the air. Hope bloomed in my chest and I knew deep down in my heart, Royce had come for me. As always.

"Where is my girl?" I heard Royce's roar from somewhere and I couldn't help but smile despite aches and pains in my body.

Stuart was inches from me, his hard dick looming closer. How I wished Royce would have cut his dick off outright.

"I would rather die than be with you, Stuart." I gathered all my strength and headbutted him. His pained howl ricocheted off the grey stone walls, and I could have sworn the dirt beneath my feet vibrated. Stars swam in my vision from the force of the impact, but I didn't waste any time.

I yanked my wrists out of the loosened ropes, jerking against them until they slid off. I jumped off the bed, then started running toward the doors, debris cutting into my bare feet.

I ignored the pain. I was almost there. Just a few more strides and—

A set of hands wrapped around me and I came back flying, my head hitting the floor with a thud. A pain like no other flayed my senses as Stuart pinned me to the filthy ground. I struggled against his hold, screaming and shouting.

“You’re not going anywhere,” he said. “I’d rather kill you than let you go back to him.”

Menace twisted my ex-fiancé’s face into something dark and sinister, but I didn’t pause to dwell on it. Every second counted.

“Let go of me!” I screamed, continuing to struggle against his hold.

I fought him tooth and nail, but my energy slowly started to fade, and the realization had panic settling like lead in my stomach.

“It’s you and me, until death do us part.” He kissed my neck, and a shiver of disgust rippled down my spine.

“Wh-what about the b-baby?” I stuttered. “Your inheritance?”

“Your desperation only turns me on,” Stuart purred, but before the words could sink in, I heard a roar. The animalistic sound startled Stuart, and I took advantage, sinking my teeth into his forearm.

He was yanked off me and a loud gunshot rattled my eardrums. I flinched as a bellow tore through the air.

I heard a familiar voice, but the wild heartbeat in my ears drowned it.

“Baby, open your eyes.”

I heard the slam of a door, followed by shouts and a violent rush of air, and I slowly opened my eyes, coming face-to-face with those dark eyes I loved so much. I watched him, stunned, as the first silent tear found its way down my cheek. Soon tears flowed freely, the floodgates well and truly open.

“Where does it hurt?” His hands roamed my body, checking every inch of me. “Is the baby okay? Are you okay? Did he—”

His voice cracked as he brought his hand to my stomach, cupping it gently.

I shook my head, my throat squeezing painfully.

Asher appeared with a gun in his hand and blood splattered over his face and hair. Everything happened so quickly. One moment I was standing and the next, he carried me out of my temporary prison.

“She needs a doctor,” Royce bellowed.

Stuart whimpered on the floor. “I need a doctor too.”

Royce didn't even hesitate. He pointed his gun and shot him point-blank. Stuart's body slumped, blood pooling around him, and I took my first full breath in what felt like days.

My trapped sob finally broke free, and once it was out, there was no stopping it. I shook like a tree's limbs in hurricane winds.

"Did you kill them all?" he asked Asher, eyes never wavering from my lips, my eyes, my throat.

I heard a grunt, and I didn't need to hear the words. I let my eyes flutter shut.

Royce saved me again.

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## Chapter 40

### Royce



**M**y wife's here. She and the baby are safe.

The words spun around in my head as the doctor examined her.  
“This would be easier if—”

“I’m not letting her go,” I snapped for the tenth time. I tightened my arms around Willow as shivers rippled through her body. She’d been so brave since we got here, but I knew she was hurting.

He was cleaning her cuts and wounds, examining her bruised back. My anger flared again at the sight of her in bright daylight, but I tamped it down.

“Is my baby okay?” Willow asked, her voice shaking. The doctor dragged over a sonogram machine, his brows furrowed with worry.

“It’s all right, sweetheart,” I murmured, shooting the doctor a look. “I’m sure he’s just double-checking everything is as it should be.”

She buried her face into my neck, keeping her sobs at bay, but she couldn’t control her shudders. Fierce protectiveness burned in my chest, hating that I failed to protect her. I should have never left her this morning. Nothing was worth risking her safety. *Their* safety.

“I think the doctor’s scared to examine you with your husband hovering over his shoulder,” Asher said wryly. “Let the man work, Royce.”

A wet laugh slipped from Willow’s lips, and I held her even tighter.

I was glad Asher was here. Despite wanting to punch him, I appreciated him cracking jokes. I sure as fuck wasn’t in the right head space to be making light of anything. Not until she and our baby got a clean bill of health.

One thing I *could* rest easy about was the manner in which Stuart's parents found their untimely death. I was sure I'd get the full rundown eventually, but all I knew was they were gone, and they did not go peacefully. With Asher's connections, the bodies were being buried in unmarked graves.

While I wanted the pleasure of tearing them apart over a prolonged period of time, none of it mattered to me as much as Willow.

"H-how did you find me?" Willow asked, shifting so the doctor could run a sonogram.

"Asher has some connections," I said, rubbing a hand over her back. "We were able to track them through Venezuela, and they eventually led us to your location."

"Ahhh, there's your heartbeat, Willow," the doctor announced, the dull whoosh-whoosh sound coming through the machine.

"Is she okay?" I rushed out. "Is the baby okay?"

"Yes, all is in order. That softer sound is the baby's heartbeat. Both are strong." He smiled at us with assurance as my heart roared to life. "Would you like to know the sex of the baby?"

Willow and I shared a glance before we both answered at the same time. "No."

After we were assured all was okay with mom and baby, I took Willow back to the boat. Asher had to come along and drive us because I refused to let go of my wife. On the way there, he stopped and picked up local dishes.

Once I had her settled, I helped her shower, then changed her into one of my clean shirts. The sight of her in my clothing tugged at my heart and I couldn't stop touching her. I'd almost lost her. I needed to see her, touch her, comfort her. Reassure myself she was actually here, safe and sound.

"I'm okay," she whispered, squeezing my hand tightly. "I was just worried about the baby." She faced me, her small hand still holding mine. "Are *you* okay?"

She'd gone through a traumatic experience, and I worried the consequences of the day would haunt her. Yet, she was asking *me* if I was okay.

"Now that you're here, I'm good." I rubbed a knuckle over her soft cheek, happy to see the color was coming back.

"Ditto," she admitted, shifting so she faced me fully. "You and this baby are all I need in my life."

A smile crossed my lips. "It's a good thing you have me. Forever. Whether you like it or not." I reached for the gift I'd tucked aside after tidying up while she was in the shower. "Happy anniversary, baby."

Her eyes, now more green than blue, glistened as she took a lip between her teeth.

"Two months," she murmured. "I... I didn't get you anything."

"You're my gift." She had no idea how much she meant to me. She was my friend, my lover, my woman. "Now open it."

With trembling fingers, she ripped the paper. She remained staring at the velvet box until I pushed the little button. Her gasp rang out, and her fingers came up to touch her lips.

"Ohhh, Royce. It's beautiful." A single tear rolled down her cheek and I wiped it with my thumb.

"Then why are you crying, baby?" I rasped, my chest twisting with so many emotions. The bracelet had the date of our first kiss engraved on it, with tiny, colorful gems dangling.

"Because I love you." Her voice softened. "So fucking much."

"Even if we're Bonnie and Clyde, living it up?"

She let out a shuddering breath, the emotions I felt myself staring back at me through her green eyes.

"For better *and* for worse."



## Chapter 41

### Willow



When we emerged from the bedroom, the moon was high up in the sky, the table was set, sparkling cider chilling and rum sitting in a bucket of ice.

“A pirate with a sensitive streak,” I teased him. “And you even thought of a non-alcoholic beverage.”

Asher tilted his head, his attentive eyes not missing my new bracelet. I didn’t think this man missed much, so the fact he knew about my pregnancy didn’t shock me.

“I live to serve,” Asher answered, his gunmetal eyes shining with amusement. Royce’s hand was still in mine, unwilling to let go, and I didn’t mind it one bit.

My gaze darted around. “I wish Kian had stuck around. I wanted to thank him before he took off. It’s the second time now that he’s helped me.”

He introduced himself once the threat was neutralized, right before Royce rushed me to the vehicle with Asher in tow. Kian stayed behind to clean up the scene and then disappeared.

“He couldn’t stick around,” Asher answered vaguely. “By the way, Winston called.”

Royce’s eyebrow lifted. “Yeah?”

“He told me to tell you to ‘stay lost’ a bit longer while Byron cleans up the mess.”

My gaze flicked to Royce curiously. “They’re working on having all charges dropped. I told you, there’s no evidence. Especially not now.

Besides, Stuart started this shit. He hurt you. But with him and his parents gone, they can't stir shit up and influence authorities."

My brows furrowed. "Everyone saw us go into the hotel and come out, leaving him beat up. How can there be no evidence? I'm sure our fingerprints were all over that hotel room when you—" My eyes darted to Asher, before returning to my husband, worried about saying too much. "Before *you* know."

"You mean before he castrated him?" Asher added. "There was no evidence."

"But how?" I asked, bewildered.

"I sent my crew in to clear the room of all fingerprints. Had them wipe the surveillance footage."

"Didn't Stuart see you?" I wondered.

"He was... drugged. Best you don't ask me to elaborate on that." He tilted his head at me, brows arched, and that was all I needed.

"Why help us?" Royce said, a pensive look on his face.

Asher shrugged. "Maybe one day, when I need help, you'll step up for me."

Royce extended his hand. "I owe you, Asher. You have my word—when you need me, I'll be there."

That evening, Royce had me sitting on his lap as we shared a meal with Asher.

"So, Willow, what are your plans now that your lunatic ex is dead and gone?"

"Please don't quote Justin Timberlake," Royce deadpanned, looking at me pointedly. "Someone used to play it on repeat until my ears bled."

"Ah, to be young again," I teased, chuckling. Aurora, Sailor, and I could listen to the same music for hours, never getting sick of it. It made me nostalgic for simpler times, and it made my heart squeeze at the thought of my best friends. I missed them. "Anyhow, I'm thinking about starting my own production company."

They shot me a surprised look.

"You've never insinuated you wanted to start your own company before now." Royce almost sounded offended.

"It only occurred to me now," I admitted, shrugging my shoulders. "I've always hated answering to someone else, letting them take credit for my work. All my old boss ever did was snuff out my creativity. I got into film

production to bring awareness to the sex trafficking industry, and I barely got to do a single show on it.”

Understanding passed Royce’s expression. My admission about what happened to Sailor’s sister, Anya, was the reason I went to school in the first place. I wanted to bring awareness onto the TV screen, and try to help the victims.

“I like it.” Royce was always supportive of my ideas, but also honest. “I want to invest in it.”

“As do I,” Asher chimed in. “I know a fruitful opportunity when I see it, and I’m not about to pass it up.”

Their faith in me struck a note in my chest and I met both their attentive gazes before settling on my husband’s eyes.

“Of course it’s a good opportunity.” Royce’s voice warmed me from the inside. “We’d be stupid not to invest.”

An exhaustive recount of what happened with the Harrises and our plans for the future kept our conversation going late into the night. Asher stayed with us late into the night, almost as if he couldn’t quite believe the threat had been eliminated.

Once he left, Royce and I remained on the deck, gazing out at the starry night. His inked muscled forearms were wrapped around me, the waves and our breathing the only sounds around us.

Then he pressed a gentle kiss to the corner of my mouth, skimming them along my jawline.

“I’m so lucky to have you.” It was a soft whisper, a promise of a future where he was the only man for me. “I’ll make you and our baby happy.”

Every time he said “our” baby, he stole another piece of my heart that I didn’t know existed.

Seated on his lap, both of us watched the moon out the cabin windows, silence engulfing us while the storm of the events of that day threatened to suck us into a tsunami. But we wouldn’t allow it.

Not today. Not tomorrow. Not ever.

## Chapter 42

### Willow



Life continued, although nothing felt the same after that day. I witnessed Royce's brutality, and I loved him even more for it. It took me a few days to regain my strength, but the doctor assured us—several times—that the drugs Stuart injected into me had no effect on the baby.

Royce, being Royce, kept a keen eye on me. For three days, he held me tightly, periodically checking my heartbeat. He even arranged to have gel and a portable ultrasound machine brought out to us on the boat, courtesy of a sizable donation to the local hospital. He insisted on taking my temperature and my blood pressure, and I half expected him to perform an OB/GYN exam. To my relief, he didn't.

He flew my parents and best friends in on the fourth day, and they brought so much junk food that Royce scolded them, forcing them to throw it overboard.

*For the sharks to eat, he'd said, or I could throw you both over and let them feed on you instead.*

Not that he'd ever succeed. One look from Alexei and Raphael had me tugging on his sleeve, reminding him of our audience and the lack of humor they shared.

"Look what I brought?" Aurora waved bags of crab chips, which she used to devour while pregnant with Kostya. "I'm craving these like they're crack."

Sailor rolled her eyes. "For everyone's sake, let's hope it's not."

“We can’t feed our baby this kind of junk,” Royce growled as he begrudgingly took a seat next to me.

I took his hand into mine. “You’re taking this a bit too far, babe.”

“No, no. Royce is right,” Mãe agreed while my papà nodded in agreement. “You’re growing a baby. *My* grandchild. You have to ensure you give it all the right stuff.”

I rolled my eyes. “Nobody said that to Sailor when she was eating gallons of ice cream. Or Aurora when she insisted on crab chips by the boatload.”

Sailor’s nose wrinkled with distaste. “I still can’t stomach crab chips to this day.”

Aurora nodded her head. “I couldn’t either.” Then her eyes flitted to her husband before she added, “Until recently.”

Was she—

“Does Kostya like crab chips?” Royce asked his sister. “I thought he didn’t like junk food.”

Her gaze darted to the little version of her husband, studying the navigation system and probably planning on dismantling it the moment nobody was looking. “He detests it. Anything with an Old Bay seasoning and he’s ready to gag. But then, that’s more of a Maryland thing, isn’t it?”

“It sure is.” I went for reverse psychology. “Wouldn’t that mean that I should eat junk food? You know, so that the baby will prefer healthy food?”

“Not my baby,” Sailor beamed, immediately shutting down my approach. “She loves her ice cream.”

“How could she not,” I teased. “It’s making her irresistible to everyone around her.”

While Kostya could be intimidating and almost dark, Anya was the opposite. Her angelic face and sweet personality had us all eating out of the palm of her hands.

“They’d make a cute couple,” I remarked, tilting my chin in the children’s direction where Kostya towered over Anya by a head while giving her his own lollipop. The lopsided grin she gave him with hearts in her eyes had my heart melting.

“Over my dead body,” Raphael grumbled.

“Are you saying your Anya is too good for my son?” Aurora sounded offended, the children completely oblivious to the ridiculous conversation going on.

Alexei's hand gentled around his wife's waist. "No, *kroshka*, he means that Kostya's too good for little Anya. Isn't that right, Santos?"

Raphael scoffed. "In your dreams."

"What's wrong with my Anya?" Sailor asked, offended. "She and Kostya are already friends. What better way to make—"

"Don't say lovers, my reina." Raphael's voice was anguished. "Anya will forever be daddy's little girl."

Sailor snorted. "I was going to say a couple, but now—"

"But now you want to arrange their marriage?" Royce chimed in unhelpfully with a mischievous glimmer in his eyes.

I smacked his arm playfully. "Stop. You know they'll get you back for it."

Royce grinned. "I'm counting on it."

My parents rolled their eyes, their gazes meeting for a meaningful moment. "I guess they'll eventually learn that love works in mysterious ways," my papà announced.

"Maybe," Mãe agreed before going into interrogation mode. "How long will you two be honeymooning?"

"We found a perfect house for you," Papà added. "Just a block from us."

Royce and I shared a look, stifling a smile. For the past few days, my parents had been hinting at wanting us close to them. In Portugal. They were terribly unsubtle. We both agreed we wanted to be in Europe—after all, all our family and close friends spent most of their time there now. But as much as I loved my parents, we couldn't be walking distance from them. Unannounced visits should be a rarity, not the norm.

"I think we'll take another few months and see some more of the world before the baby comes," Royce answered, looking as handsome as ever. He exuded masculinity with his shirt rolled to his elbows, revealing his strong, inked forearms. "But we agreed we'll settle in Portugal or Spain. We have an agent scouting properties. Once we narrow it down, we'll make appointments."

I dare say my parents heard nothing after Portugal, both of them grinning like they'd just won the lottery.

The commotion of the next hour buzzed with promises of a future where I'd finally have my own happily-ever-after with the boy I kissed ten years ago.

Our love story might have not been conventional, and our soon-to-be extended family would be different from my friends', but it was perfect nonetheless.

This was our life, our future, and we'd live it to the fullest.

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## Chapter 43

### Willow



**M**y heart tripped watching our families, and when I looked at my friends, I knew they felt the same. Appreciation for what we had—good men, beautiful children, and each other. The catamaran brimmed with life as my husband lounged on the floor and humored his nephew playing a video game.

It had been a week since the kidnapping and this was our family's last night with us before Royce and I would continue sailing. We planned on reaching the southernmost point of South America and then journeying back, only to return to Venezuela again in a few months for a new business venture. It would be my first step toward producing the documentary I'd been dreaming about working on for years. It was how I wanted to make the difference and repay Anya for all her suffering.

Stuart and his parents were dead and I'd be a hypocrite to mourn them. They'd made their bed, and they had no one to blame but themselves.

Royce's eyes found me, his dark, velvety gaze full of love and reverence.

I only had a few seconds to get lost in it before my friends started their interrogation, wrapping me in a cocoon of hugs and questions.

"Now tell us every detail since the wedding," Sailor said, hugging me.

"Not every detail," Aurora cringed. "I don't need to know about your freaky time with my brother."

"I'm sorry but I had to listen to your recount of freaky time with Alexei," I said teasingly, hugging them both.



“Yeah,” Sailor said, egging Aurora on. “I still have a hard time sleeping at night.”

“Fine, I’ll block my ears,” Aurora said. “Now tell us what the hell happened with that idiot Stuart?”

“It’s a long story,” I said. “The most important thing is that he and his parents are out of our lives.”

“Thank God,” Sailor murmured. “Only an idiot would kidnap a pregnant woman like that.”

“Or a psychopath,” Aurora reasoned.

“Never mind Stuart and his parents.” I’d prefer not to think about them for a while. “I have something more important to talk to you about.” Both their eager gazes found me in anticipation. “I’m finally doing what I set out to do after college, starting with producing a documentary.”

Sailor stilled. “What kind?”

“Human trafficking,” I said, locking eyes with Sailor as the ghost of her sister lurked in the shadows we tried to ignore. I took both their hands into mine. “I’d like to dedicate it to your sister”—my gaze found Aurora’s—“and to your husband, but only if you’re both okay with it. The title would be *Every Silenced Anya and Alexei*.”

Sailor’s cheeks were wet when I wrapped my arms around her. Even after all these years, I knew the topic of her sister broke her heart. Anya protected her, ensuring her baby sister’s happiness at her own expense.

Sailor finally managed to find her voice.

“I love it,” she croaked. “She would be proud to be the inspiration for your documentary.”

I turned to look at my sister-in-law. My sudden announcement had her looking shaken, but she recovered quickly.

“I don’t want to speak on Alexei’s behalf, but I suspect he’ll agree. Be honored even.”

Worry creased Sailor’s forehead. “There’s nothing that would tie little Anya to it, right?”

I shook my head. “No. No one will connect them. Only we will know.”

“Look at us,” Aurora’s voice softened. “Who would’ve ever thought we’d end up here.”

I swallowed past the knot of emotion in my throat, realizing how close I was to missing out on these moments. My girls always knew how to ground me.

“I know. We’re lucky,” I whispered softly.

“We are,” Sailor agreed. “But we also worked for it too.”

I pressed my lips together at the thought of all the years of pain and heartache we’d all endured.

But we were here now, and I couldn’t have planned a better story myself.

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## Chapter 44

### Willow



Days flew by, and so did the weeks.

Our family and friends left last week, and we resumed our honeymoon leaving the harbor and sailing the seas. Cape Horn was next on the map and so far it had been smooth sailing. According to Royce, who'd been monitoring weather patterns obsessively, it looked like we'd have to take over from autopilot soon, and consider disembarking before the sea became too violent.

Bottom line, if I wanted to get laid, tonight was the night.

I caught a final glance at the mirror, at the sex goddess in a see-through emerald babydoll lingerie staring back at me, and I made my way out of the bathroom. Royce was laid out in nothing but his sweats, his upper torso on full display as he scrolled on his iPad.

I watched him with longing, the need to touch him equating that of breathing.

"Hello, handsome."

He looked up from his iPad and his gaze burned like an open flame as I closed the distance between us.

"What are you up to, baby?"

I smiled innocently, pressing a knee on the bed, then crawling my way to him. My lips brushed against his jaw and his muscles pulled taut.

"Are you tired, Mr. Ashford?" I rasped against his skin.

"Willow, you need to rest and recover." His voice was rough against my skin.

“I’m rested and recovered,” I assured him, the storm in his eyes reflecting his internal conflict. I kissed my way up his jaw to the corner of his mouth. “I ache for you.”

A shudder rolled through him and our mouths met in a passionate, hungry kiss. I wanted him feral.

Dominant.

As if he could taste my desire, he ordered in a low, husky voice, “Reach out and put your hands together.” I scrambled to follow his order. “Like you’re praying.”

“Will you be my priest?” I teased, doing as instructed, a throbbing ache in my core anticipating what he had in store for me.

He produced a silky tie from the bedside table and fastened it around my wrists. My eyes flew to his, full of questions and lust.

“Patience is a virtue,” he drawled lazily while I knelt there, bared and vulnerable to him, but I’d never felt safer. Moisture pooled between my thighs, slicking my skin.

“Easy for you to say,” I retorted dryly, my tone breathless. “Meanwhile I’m over here wondering if you’re going to whip me or fuck me.”

“Why not both,” he said with a devilish smile. “Now slide off the bed.” I was on my feet before he could finish the sentence. One of his hands lowered between my thighs, gliding it over my drenched core. “Your pussy doesn’t seem to mind the idea.”

I burned hotter with each passing second, my thighs clenching greedily for more of whatever he had in store for me. It didn’t matter that I was his toy, completely at his mercy, because Royce always delivered.

He always took care of me, even before we became lovers. It was my turn to give him anything he wanted. The submission. The release. The oblivion.

“Test the binding.” His fingers kept teasing my clit, and a moan bubbled in my throat at the delicious friction. “I want to make sure they’re not uncomfortable.”

I attempted to pull my wrists apart, but there was no discomfort, only silk brushing against my flesh.

“They’re good,” I breathed.

He took my wrists, leading me over to the four-poster bed. Everything from the black oak to the crimson sheets screamed carnal pleasure.

“Bend over and use the post for support.”

Without hesitation, I did as he bid and my whole body purred with satisfaction upon hearing his hummed “Good girl.”

I grasped the post, curling my fingers around it, then glanced over my shoulder, my breaths coming out in soft pants. “Is this okay?”

“Lower,” he rasped, his eyes meeting mine. “Good job.” I sighed, getting in position, bent over and my ass grinding against him. His palm rubbed my butt cheek affectionately. “Don’t let go of the post. If you do, I’ll spank you. Understand?”

I wiggled my ass against him, barely stifling a giggle. “Yes, sir.”

He smacked my ass—hard—and I yelped. Another came soon after, the smack of his palm against my ass loud but painless.

His lips curved into a smile matching the dark expression etched on his beautiful face.

“Part your legs.” His hands came to my hips, and he pushed my legs apart with his muscular thighs as he positioned himself against me. He reached up with one hand, trailing it down my spine affectionately. Then he bent down, his chest against my back, and peppered kisses on my sensitive skin. “Ready?”

My response was a moan. I was more than ready. With his free hand, he reached around to my front, palming my breast and tugging on my nipples. We’d barely gotten started and I was already trembling against him.

“Hold tight.” He grabbed my hips. “This is going to be hard and fast, baby.” I remained quiet, bracing myself for the wild ride, when he yanked my hair back and wound it around his wrist. “What’s our safe word?” he whispered, his mouth next to my ear.

“Pineapple.”

I could feel his hard cock against my slick entrance. He pushed me facedown against the plush duvet and slammed inside me with a single powerful thrust, jolting me forward.

I cried out, my eyes watering at the sensation, my inner muscles clutching his length greedily.

“You can take it, baby,” he purred, his tone guttural. “That pussy was made for me, just like my cock was made for you.”

*Fuck*, his words were enough to unravel me.

My breaths came out in small pants and I pushed back at him, desperate for more friction. He held on to my hips, his fingers digging into my flesh

while he eased out of me slowly until only the tip of his shaft remained inside me.

Then he slammed into me again so hard it knocked the breath out of my lungs and my grip on the post loosened.

“Hold on, Willow,” he gritted through clenched teeth when my hands loosened around the post. I gripped it harder and pushed back against him as he fucked me mercilessly.

I whimpered, my mind blanking at the forceful invasion as absolute pleasure burst through me. My body shuddered with each punishing thrust that coaxed squeals out of my mouth.

“You’re taking every inch of me so good,” Royce grunted. “My beautiful wife.”

His hand remained on my hip while the other pressed against my back, forcing my face deeper into the mattress, muffling my noises. There was nothing but mind-numbing pleasure and pain—a combination I never imagined I’d crave.

The bed knocked against the wall, and I could feel a gathering deep inside me—an electric shiver matching the rhythm of his thrusts.

He yanked my head back and another cry fell from my lips.

“Don’t stop,” I cried. Royce continued to move roughly against me, in me, his breathing harsh, moaning, groaning. “Please... please...”

Sweat gathered at my temple and along my neck, and my inner walls fluttered around his cock.

Another thrust and my body exploded, a hoarse scream shattering through the air. The need—so unfamiliar and dark—coiled beneath my skin, tearing me apart at the seams. I exploded into a million sparks, spiraling until there was nothing left.

It was just him and me.

I looked back as Royce fucked me through my orgasm. He stilled, groaning, his beautiful face twisted with the same pleasure I felt as he finished inside of me.

He trailed kisses over my heated skin, whispering words of praise, before taking my chin between his fingers and kissing me deeply.

“I love you, Mrs. Ashford,” he said with a soft, relaxed smile that soaked through me like sunshine on a foggy day. “You are the best part of me.”

“Good,” I panted, my voice breathless. “Because you’ve always been the best part of me.”

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# Epilogue

Royce



Our daughter was only a few hours old, but she already ruled us and our world.

She had thick auburn hair and golden-colored skin. I swore up and down her eyes were green, but in certain lights, they were blue. She took after her mãe. Willow's parents agreed, claiming she was a replica of Willow as an infant.

Calista Olivia Ashford.

I held my daughter in my arms, marveling at the mysterious way life worked out. Our journey to each other was long, but it happened exactly the way it was meant to.

Willow and this baby completed me.

With my child in my arms, I walked over to the window, letting the warm Portugal sun touch her face. I gave her the first glimpse of the world she would one day explore.

"See all this, princess," I murmured softly, careful not to wake up my wife. "It's all going to be yours."

She would be a heartbreaker just like her mãe, and I'd end any boy who would dare come close to my baby girl.

"Daddy's going to spoil you."

A soft voice had me turning around to find my wife watching us. She glowed with love and such strength, taking my breath away every single time.

*God, I love her.*



“How could I not,” I said, keeping my voice low. “My princess stole my heart, just like her mãe.”

An even bigger smile swept across her face, wide and happy. My heart nearly burst from the sight of it. I had everything right here.

Willow extended her hands and I put our little princess in her arms so she could bring her closer to her chest. I leaned in and combed my fingers gently through Calista’s hair.

“Royce...” she whispered. Her expression was filled with anguish, and no words were needed.

I knew she was worried about Stuart’s grandfather. He attempted to stake a claim on the baby before she was even born. Like she was an object. I had every intention of putting an end to it. I’d fight him with the power my name still carried, would call in favors from every single person indebted to me. That man would never come near our daughter.

I cupped her cheeks gently, careful not to wake our baby. “I’m going to say this once, so listen closely.” I stroked the side of her face with my thumb. “You are mine. Calista is mine. Forever. There is nobody that will ever change that. Fucking nobody.”

*Even if it means killing Stuart’s grandfather,* but I kept those words to myself. Today was the best day of our lives and nothing would ruin it.

“Promise?”

I pressed a kiss on her forehead, then our daughter’s. “I promise.”

She looked up at me, our eyes meeting for a moment, before she said, “I love you so much. I couldn’t imagine having this baby with anyone else. We’re forever yours.”

And I was forever theirs.

# Epilogue

Willow



*Five Years Later*

“P eeeeeasse. Mãe, peeeasse!”

I smiled at my spunky five-year-old. Calista was our only girl, but she helped me keep her brothers in line. The apple of our eye. Well, she was the apple of my eye, because even though she wasn’t biologically his, she owned all of her daddy. Royce spoiled her, just as he did me.

Just as Royce and my parents predicted, she was a spitting image of me, complete with Energizer Bunny batteries that had her going from the time she woke up to the time she fell asleep.

“Now what is it that you need, Calista?” I asked calmly, mixing the chocolate chip cookie dough.

I saw the thoughts move behind her emerald eyes as she puckered her pink lips. She learned early on you caught more flies with honey than with vinegar.

“Mãe.” Her voice was so soft, so sweet, and she put my hand to her mouth, placing a tender kiss on my finger. “Can I peeeeeeeasse go with Daddy?”

Royce was taking the boys to a soccer game with Alexei and Kostya while Aurora was due back here with her daughters. Sadly, shortly after her visit to us in Venezuela, Aurora had a miscarriage. Destiny had different plans for her, but she was blessed less than a year later with twin girls.

“Don’t you want to play with your cousins?” I asked her. “Nataliya and Ines will be disappointed if you’re not here. So will your grandparents.”

She flapped her hands in frustration. “They can come too.”

“They don’t like soccer games,” I pointed out patiently as I slid the tray of cookies into the oven. “They want to play princesses.”

Nataliya and Ines could play with dresses and shiny things all day, never making a sound, while my own daughter couldn’t sit still for longer than ten minutes.

As if she could read my thoughts, she batted her thick lashes at me. “Peeeeeeasse. I’ll love you forever.”

She held up ten fingers as if they signified forever. That number signified so much more though. Royce. Us. Spending ten years to find a way to each other. One day we’d tell her that story, but something told me her patience was already wearing thin with me.

“I’ll be back so soon, so soooo soon,” she added, continuing to bat her lashes. She hugged herself, swaying on her feet like she was ready to break into a song. She didn’t disappoint. “Peeeeeease, peeeeease, peeeeease.”

I laughed, knowing she was manipulating me and that really, it meant hours of her being gone with the boys.

“All right.” I sighed, giving her loud smooches on her cheeks. “But only if Nataliya and Ines want to go too.”

She nodded her head frantically, excited that I caved. She let out a happy giggle, then stormed out of the kitchen. I knew she’d have no trouble convincing her cousins it was a better idea to go out in the scorching summer Portugal sun rather than stay home.

The timer went off, and I turned to pull the cookies out of the oven. I grabbed them and as I set them down on top of the stove to cool off, Royce appeared in the threshold, leaving the door to the terrace open behind him.

“You gave in, huh?” he teased as a soft breeze swept through the kitchen.

Lights were strung above the table out there, carefully woven through the latticework. The east-facing wall of the pergola was climbing with wisteria and it always brought to mind the romantic nights we had on our honeymoon, dining over candlelight at tiny little restaurants, soft merengue music drifting between us, not a care in the world. He came over to me and wrapped me in his arms, pulling me back to the now.

“Only if she convinces her cousins,” I added, defending myself.

He chuckled. “She’s offering them heaven and earth already.”

I sighed. “I’m worried she’ll be bribing the president one day.”

He grinned. “I hope she does. I’ll be right behind her writing the check.”

I gently swatted his arm. “Stop it. You’re just as bad as her.”

“I can’t help it.” He brushed a kiss against my nose. “She’s like her mommy. Remember when you were bribing the head of a cartel to stop trafficking?”

“How could I forget?”

I almost ended up trafficked myself, and Royce had to rescue me. But it was all part of the job, which I loved. My production company had taken off. Sailor joined our team, and a few other journalists with the same goals as ours. We were getting ready to kick off the fourth season of *Every Silenced Anya and Alexei*, covering South Africa this time. Netflix and Amazon competed to pick us up.

But none of that mattered as long as we were making a difference and it was such a rewarding experience.

He took my hand when I was close enough, pulling my wrist up to his lips and setting them over my pulse. “Where do you think she gets it from?”

I shook my head. How was I supposed to win with two of them?

“Where are the boys?” I asked.

“Ready to take off and wreak havoc on the soccer field.”

He glanced down at my bare feet, at my toenails painted green. Over the years, Royce had somehow managed to continue procuring discontinued items I loved, and while he always showered me with jewelry, nothing beat that gesture.

And all along, we’d gravitated even closer. We’d put down roots. Time had been good to us. He still made me breathless. He still made me want him, crave him, ache for him—every day, every night, every second of my life.

He was my best friend. My lover. My heart. The father of my children. My everything. With each passing day, our love only grew.

He took a step closer to me, and my breath caught in my throat at the love that stared back at me.

“How did I get so lucky?” Royce said, grinning, but before he could speak another word, I lifted up on my toes and pressed my mouth against

his, wanting him so bad that I ached. When he broke the kiss, my hands were still gripping his shirt.

There were times in my life that I didn't think I'd survive ten minutes, much less ten years without him.

"I love you," I murmured, running my hand along his chest.

His expression turned serious as he cupped my face.

"You complete me. You and the children are everything to me." He brushed his mouth against mine. "I love you so much that sometimes it hurts to breathe. I love you, Mrs. Ashford."

Three little words that made the world go round. Three little words that could start and finish wars. Our very own happily-ever-after.

As long as we lived it together.

THE END

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# Acknowledgments

I want to thank my friends and family for their continued support.

To my alpha and beta readers—you are all amazing. You put up with my crazy deadlines and even crazier organization. I couldn't do this without you.

My books wouldn't be what they are without each one of you.

To the bloggers and reviewers who helped spread the word about every one of my books. I appreciate you so much and hearing you love my work, makes it that much more enjoyable!

And last but not least, **to all my readers!** This wouldn't be possible without you. Thank you for believing in me. Thank you for your amazing and supportive messages. Simply, THANK YOU.

I get to do this because all of you.

XOXO

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# About the Author

Curious about Eva's other books? You can check them out here. Eva Winners's Books <https://bit.ly/3SMMsrN>

Eva Winners writes anything and everything romance, from enemies to lovers to books with all the feels. Her heroes are sometimes villains, because they need love too, right? Her books are sprinkled with a touch of suspense and mystery, a healthy dose of angst, a hint of violence and darkness, and lots of steamy passion.

When she's not working and writing, she spends her days either in Croatia or Maryland, daydreaming about her next story.

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